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THE SHORT STORY

Edited by MANJERI S. ISVARAN

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The Editor will be glad to consider stories offered for publication and will endeavour to return unsuitable manuscripts when they are accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope. He will take no responsibility for the loss of manuscripts.

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The WHISPERING GALLERY of LIFE & LETTERS

(This section is devoted to Editorial Comments on cuerrnt topics of interest)

The truly great
Have all one age, and from one visible place
Shed influence. They, both in power and act,
Are permanent, and Time is not with them,
Save as it worketh for them, they in it.—

COLERIDGE

It is in the highest degree unphilosophic to call language or diction the dress of our thoughts . . . It is the incarnation of our thoughts.—

WORDSWORTH

A Case to Establish

'IT is simply an allegory—"George Silverman's Explanation"—of his own life, written in an auto-intoxication of self-pity, his most constant and his strongest emotion.' Thus Mr Hugh Kingsmill in writing the life of Charles Dickens which he calls "The Sentimental Journey" (Wishart, 10s. 6d.), and the story that Dickens wrote for an American paper is made to stroke the whole span of his life, variety and a high hue being added to it from his letters and novels. We all know that "David Copperfield" is elaborately autobiographical as Dickens himself wrote: 'It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age. It is wonderful to me, that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion enough on me—a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally—to suggest that something might have been spared, as certainly it might have been, to place me at any common school. Our friends, I take it, were tired out . . . . My father and mother were quite satisfied.' Such sentences, and similar others in portraying his first love Maria Beadnell (whom he could not marry because he was a poor reporter) as Flora Flinching and his attitude towards Kate Hogarth, his wife, flash autobiographical facets to the eyes of Mr Kingsmill and the result is a thesis of a settled view instead of a biography that will add anything new to our knowledge of a most natural genius. In the interesting process of nosing for the fly in the jam Mr Kingsmill shows himself as a clever researcher in psycho-analysis—clammy cells and passional lightnings.

Novelist as Editor

MR L. A. G. STRONG has become Editor of *Lovat Dickson's Magazine*, a journal devoted exclusively to fiction, that began to be

issued from November 1933 under the editorship of Mr P. Gilchrist Thompson. Mr Strong is one of the few best story-writers now writing in English and though he has done a good number of novels in ambitious freedom for comment and description he has not lost his mastery of the compact, crystal quality of form of the short story. In a recent lecture to the English Association at the Conway Hall Mr Strong asked the question, When is a short story not a short story? and himself gave this interesting answer: When it is something than an editor does not want. And in his attempt to draw a line between writing for "shinycovered" magazines and writing seriously he said that 'the most highly-praised names among contemporary writers are those in least demand, because their work deals with thought whereas such editors only demand that an author shall postulate a problem and that he shall solve it in terms of action, and by current canon of morality. Popular magazines provide ways of escape from dull lives, and it is therefore, the duty of a serious writer to provide more seemly ways of escape if he proposes to try and sell his wares in the usual market.' *Seemly ways of escape*--a tip of great force and beauty that will do a world of good to the Indians who write stories in English and much more to the proprietors of the Indo-Anglian journals.

The Late E. Arlington Robinson

IN New York, early in April, died Edwin Arlington Robinson, a great American poet. He was born in Raine in 1869, educated at a country school, and entered Harvard in 1891. He published his first book of verse, "The Torrent and the Night" in 1896, when he was twenty-seven. Next year he came to New York, and having decided to devote his life to poetry he lived modestly by a number of odd jobs. In 1905 his poetry was reviewed in the *Outlook* by President Theodore Roosevelt which won him wide distinction, and the President, anxious to help the poet, offered him a Consulship in Mexico. Robinson declined this generous offer preferring to remain in New York; but a post in the Customs House was found for him which he held for some years. A shy and modest poet, Robinson 'never talked about his own poetry; he never criticised other people's poetry; and he wouldn't read in public for a million dollars.' He is the only man who has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize three times—in 1922, 1925 and 1927. 'Psychological portraiture of the Browning quality, but not in the Browning manner, has been the substance of much of his verse; tragic vignettes of splendid failures in which the pity is never inconsonant with the gentle irony . . . . The speculative sadness that is over much of his work often gives place to tragic force; and what has been taken for fatalism and pessimism is rather a wistful straining after hope.' Thus writes the *Manchester Guardian* about Robinson's poetry in the course of an obituary notice.

The James Tait Black Memorial Prizes

THE Professor of English Literature at Edinburgh University who is the adjudicator has awarded the "James Tait Black Memorial Prizes" instituted by the late Mrs Janet Coats or Black, of Millearn, Ayr, as a memorial to her husband, the late Mr James Tait Black, publisher, Edinburgh, for the year 1934 to Professor J. E. Neale's *Queen Elizabeth* (for the best biography or literary work of that nature) and to Mr Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* (for the best novel or work of that nature).

BEGINNINGS

By MANJERI S. ISVARAN

LOOK over the plywood partition that runs shoulder-high through the middle of the living-room and follow what is going on in a most melodious little home.

Two girls, apparently of the same age—they might be five—bustled about animatedly whilst a boy, a year older, sat leaning against a pillar and listening to them. Surely he was the most important person in the company and though it was the privilege of his sex to be passive when he liked he was not precocious enough to know it; his eyes betrayed such sunny interest in the activity of the girls; the state was thrust upon him. And he could join them only when asked to.

One corner was the kitchenette where were arranged neatly small cooking utensils of diverse shapes, some of brass and some of smooth soapstone. A bit of coir like a tousled tuft of hair served the purpose of a broom and while one girl swept the floor with it the other sprinkled water from an imaginary pitcher to quell the rising dust.

'Shall I bring you the fuel now?' asked the boy in a tone of impatience and rising.

'Not just yet, Jagu,' said Girija, tilting her head and smiling. 'We've to draw the *kolam*, cut the vegetables, wash the rice and do a lot of things against cooking the meal. I'll tell you, dear, when it is time to fetch the fuel.' She seated him again, stroking his back with the tenderness of a mother. Jagu was the endearing abbreviative of Jagadisan.

'Janaki,' said she, next, to her partner in housekeeping, 'have you taken out the brinjals and the cucumber piece from the basket?'

'Yes,' replied that lady, whose eyes remained perpetually wide at some unseen and unknowable wonder. She was a meek creature, all smiles and dimples, with voice cooing as a dove's. Her nose was slightly turned at the tip and it was her grievance, against whom she did not particularly know, when her mother said that she would not look beautiful with a nose-pearl. That ornament wanted a nose without any tilt and Janaki secretly hoped that her tilt would vanish one day.

Girija was cast in a different mould. Her features were exquisitely chiselled; bones and not flesh contributed to her symmetry, and she promised a more superb nubility. The peal of silver bells—that was the note one heard when she talked, but it changed into a screech whenever her view was contradicted or she felt she was snubbed. She laughed her girlish laughter and wept her girlish tears with equal intensity. And her laughter sounded the sweetest, when having attended to the preliminaries of housekeeping she said to Jagu and Janaki:—

'Now both of you go to that room yonder while I bathe. And Janaki, you shall bathe after I have done.'

The two vanished accordingly. Girija looked around to assure herself that nobody was in sight; then going to the wall performed the gesture of turning on a tap that was not there. She next stripped herself, folded the petticoat and laying it carefully aside stood delicate as a lily in all its luminous nakedness. Suddenly with a wriggle she turned round and saw two pairs of eyes peering from the room opposite to her. She threw herself down crouching, much injured and abashed, and cried reproachingly: 'It is very wicked of you to do that. I asked you not to look out.' The answer was a low gurgling laugh with two distinct notes in it and before she could make a more vehement observation the gloom of the chamber had absorbed the inquisitive eyes.

'Through the thickening moisture in her eyes she saw everything a twilight blur.'

She went through her bath in an elaborate manner, whistling softly while rubbing her limbs with the soap of her radiant fancy; applied the unprepared turmeric paste to her delicate cheeks; scolded the tap for dripping scanty water; towelled her body and slid hastily into her petticoat. Then she gave her braided hair a smoothing and called her friends.

They came out. It was her and Jagadisan's turn to be in the room next.

Janaki passed in an exact manner through the pantomime of bathing.

The girls said that Jagadisan had a little fever coming on; he was to wipe his body with a wet cloth and on recovery he should bathe.

Cooking then began in right earnest. This lasted for about five minutes in the course of which a multitude of dishes was prepared. Curds, dholl, ghee, curries, and the puddings seasoned wonderfully stood in their proper places. One girl peered into the pot of rice and half-closed her eyes as if to resist the curling steam.

'Now I shall lay the silver plate of my husband and serve him food,' said Janaki, looking at Jagadisan.

'What! Whose husband?' asked Girija.

'Mine, of course,' whispered Janaki, pouting her lips. This meek little girl knew perfectly well what she was saying.

'Yours!' gasped Girija. 'He's my husband; my mother told me so.' And she caught hold of the boy's hands and kissed his cheeks. Janaki came running and clasping Jagadisan's waist dragged him to her. Girija pinched her rival's arms and pinch was given for pinch. Jagadisan freed himself from their clasp and the girls began to quarrel without further check, pecking at each other like birds, pulling the hair, clawing and snarling like vicious cats. Janaki had the worst of it, frailer of the two that she was, and she subsided into a fit of sobbing. At this Jagadisan came to her side and throwing his arms round her neck said, looking at Girija: 'You are a naughty girl and I don't like you.'

Janaki smiled through her tears.

Girija stood like a little fury, her bosom heaving and the corners of her mouth puckering. But she did not cry; she stared at the boy and the girl before her, saw them each close to the other, side to side, cheek to cheek, and if Janaki knew that there was anything called hate, it burnt, as hate never burnt yet, in Girija's eyes. Suddenly she turned her back on them and rushing to the kitchen corner kicked about the cooking utensils. The brass things tinkled scattering and those of soapstone scratched white lines across the brick floor.

Her enemies were too amazed to laugh. They walked out slowly, whispering together and glancing furtively once behind.

Girija sat amidst the toy vessels covering her face with her hands, lost in an abyss of forlornness. The golden home they were building had suddenly blanched lead; through the thickening moisture in her eyes she saw everything a twilight blur, felt like being in the womb where she had begun; unalive but conscious of the rumblings of an imbecile world.

There is a mixture of Rasa & Ras bhāsa — an ignorance of aesthetics so natural to a writer ignorant of the Sanskrit models.

THE 'HINDU' WIDOW

By AUNDY.

'WHERE there is a will, there must be a litigation,' a wag has whispered elsewhere. And it naturally followed when she became a widow at eighteen and ended, as usual, after a volley of dirty mud slung on her devoted head for eight years, in a compromise. She, the residuary legatee, came into absolute ownership of one-fourth of her husband's lakh and a half, her reversioners sharing the balance. Legal acumen thus left her little ewe floating in the air as a microbe of potential litigation!

Her husband had been her idol. Her three years of marital life, constricted as they had been by a brace of jealous parents-in-law, had in them stray moments of stolen bliss as well. But just when her young Proteselaus was about to emancipate himself from the parental bondage into a budding Advocate at Madras, Providence had cut his life short. All her thwarted ambitions and hopes were, thenceforth, concentrated upon educating herself and her little daughter under the aegis of her father at Trivandrum.

But that influential official of the Travancore State service too having died at the seventh year of her widowhood, the last months of her litigational epoch had demanded her constant presence at Madras. 'Hindu' duty having compelled her to leave the little child in its grandmaternal household, the management of her hard-won estate too had naturally slipped into the hands of that elderly lady during the succeeding higher educational epoch of the widow at Benares and other places. And at the end of the fifth year of the new management, all the liquid cash and jewels had, as usual, inevitably evaporated and condensed into pro-notes, receipts, and letters executed by the mother in favour of the absentee widow!

It was the winter of 1932—a year and a half after the famous Sarda Act had produced a marvellous biological phenomenon among British Indian brahmin girls. It had been their racial privilege till the All-fools' Day of 1931—an advantageous start, I mean, of the girls of other communities—to attain puberty as early as their guardians or husbands wanted them to. But Dame Nature—true to her 150 years of loyalty to the British Government—had withdrawn the above-said privilege from that memorable day, sacrificing the biologically 'Hindu' evolution of the poor Varnasramite girl of British India at the altar of eugenics. And the inevitable had immediately followed too—girls began to attain age only after the completion of their fourteenth year! What a terrible calamity to 'Hinduism' and its 'ideals'!

This intimate co-operation between Dame Nature and the Government of India had, however, been a blessing in disguise to our young widow's mother. It had enabled her son to complete his studies and philanderings in England before the costly ceremony of the marriage of his niece could consume the little cash that his mother had secreted for emergencies.

But the young widow, on the contrary, had been cursing her already accursed fate that the advent of the would-be progenitor of her line had to be adjourned by a couple of years by the new legislation. Nevertheless, she was suddenly relieved of her worry by a very clever young man of means and parentage, whom she had booked at Madras for her prospective son-in-law, volunteering to compel Dame Nature to come to terms with him by a double threat of producing a bogus birth-certificate for the little girl and of marrying her in Travancore State territory.

Yes, it was the new-moon day of December, 1932. She had rushed up to

Trivandrum a couple of days back on receipt of a message to see her ailing child. The girl had fallen in a paralytic fit a fortnight ago at the Trivandrum beach and, in spite of the best medical aid, had been continuing in an acute state of semi-consciousness. Anxiety was, therefore, written large on the poor widow's face as she stood moodily in the drawing room of her mother's residence.

II

'Sit down, sister,' said M—, as he entered and threw himself unceremoniously into an easy-chair.

He was thirty years old, but looked much older than her with his tall, lean and haggard form. His thick eyebrows trimmed and dyed with scrupulous care were set off against the sundried brown of his forehead. His pale, thick lower lip had assimilated through inordinate smoking a blackish tint. The vermilion mark between his eyebrows was set over the black bridge of his shellac-framed spectacles.

A graduate of the University of Madras, having lisped for some time in a minor machincal trade, he was driven to business by necessity rather than aptitude. He was incidentally acting as the *de facto* manager of this household as well—much to the chagrin of his own wife and two children whom he had been neglecting for the past four years. But since conservatism refused to see anything unnatural in a young man's association with an immature girl of twelve and its grandmother of forty-four, the matter rested there, not, however, without the innocent absentee widow herself being the unconscious victim of irrational 'Hindu' gossip from a distance of five hundred miles!

'I am really indebted to your kindliness towards this household these four years of my absence,' the widow said complimenting him.

'Don't mention. It's my duty—a weak attempt to keep up my promise to your brother beyond the seas.'

'You know the gossip of the town?'

'It can't scare me away. I am made of sterner stuff.'

'But it wounds me. I spoke to mother about it. She ought not to have deprived your wife and children of your valuable company.'

'They have wiser counsel and company. By-the-bye, why did you settle your daughter's marriage so early?'

'To save trouble to friends like you by chartering thus a legitimate manager of my finances. The sooner I did it, the better for all.'

'Not at all. It may, on the contrary, be worse. A son-in-law and manager in one has ever been a tyrant and swindler. One degree less, to be sure, than a son-in-law and brother-and-manager in one! That's by the way. But Providence, too, seems to decree that it should be as it is.'

'Why?'

'Don't you think that your child is too frail a bark for you to venture the ocean of life upon?'

'And so?'

''Tis folly to waste your life.'

At this juncture of their conversation I entered in with a Good morning.

I had returned from Madras just that morning with Dr Sarada after my unconventional marriage with her. She and the widow had been chums at Madras. Though holding views diametrically opposed to Sarada's, she had the moral courage to organise a dinner in her honour at the college hostel with a view to meet us face to face in a fair debate on the subject of Marriage Reform.

'Be seated, brother Pichai. Where's Sarada?' the widow asked.

'Hasn't finished yet her round of visits. She doesn't know your arrival in this city.'

'How kind of you to call!'

'My friend, M—, gave me the news. How is the poor girl?'

'Mother says she is far better than she was.'

'My friend felt sorry that his proposal to unite your brother with her was thrown out by you.'

'Will it be a legal alliance ?'

'It's never illegal to 'marry an uncle,' put in M—. 'He is not a Sapinda nor a Sagotra.'

'But it is most un-eugenical and unconventional,' said I.

'Yes, and that was why I fished elsewhere for a bridegroom.'

'Much to the disappointment of your dear mother,' added M—.

'But she did right, I should say,' I defended. 'Nevertheless, I have the greatest respect for her mother—I mean *our* Mother—such a kind and large-hearted lady—she was more than a grandmother to your little girl. If all motherhood be indeed as what is embodied in her, I must reckon myself as most unfortunate in having lost my mother in my infancy!'

'Your feministic impulse is perhaps a reaction of your motherlessness,' remarked M—. 'But you are right in this particular case: a fatherless child is ever a centre towards which all love gravitates.'

'I had almost thought that in spite of your mother's protests you had *settled* your girl's marriage,' I began.

'Yes, I had. But then she was all right.'

'What does the doctor say ?'

'Infantile palsy. Her vital organs being in good order, I am told she will be able to walk in a few weeks.'

'How did this happen ?'

'Inexplicable. Mother says she never allowed her even to expose herself to chill air.'

'I can testify to that,' interposed M—. 'The little girl was the cynosure of the whole household.'

'Won't you sit down, Mr Pichai ?'

'Thank you; but I came to see the child.'

'Excuse me, I forgot. Come on.'

Both of us hurried out of the room.

III

M—was left alone. It seemed his plans had been deeply laid. Casting a surveying glance around, he brought out from his trouser-pocket a bunch of keys and peeped out to see whether anybody was coming. But his further acts were expedited with electric speed. Opening a steel trunk that was kept in a corner and taking out therefrom a packet of papers, he locked it up again. Advancing to the window, he detached a pro-note and some letters from the packet to see if they were the same that he wanted and pocketed everything in satisfaction—including the bunch of keys—when the mother of the widow entered, staring intently at him.

She was, as I have already remarked forty-four. Her *purdha-nashin* life, as contrasted with the nomadic one of her daughter, had given a corresponding polish to her skin and she looked, therefore, much younger than her daughter. She wore, as befitted her high station in life, gold-rimmed spectacles. Her right forefinger was thrust in between two pages of a copy of Sister Subbulakshmi Ammal's Tamil rendering of the Bhagavad-Gita. Her tongue continued chanting mechanically an evidently interrupted hymn of Thiruvoymozhi.

'Lecherous villain! Jilting me too?' she said after a pause. 'Eh, brat! Get away!'

'Right! Good-bye!' said M—, and staged a walk out.

Quick as thought the woman threw the book on the table, ran after him, and was back into the apartment in an instant, dragging the young man by his arm. Thrusting him back into a chair and after a pause, the panted: 'Betrayer!'

'Never.'

'Liar!'

'You were unable to teach that virtue to me in spite of your proficiency in it.'

'You accused me of lewdness?'

'I am not responsible for any person's correct intuition.'

'Made indecent advances to her?'

'Only decent ones—at least more decent than what you are making to me now.'

'"Put not your trust on urchins"', goes the adage. I was a fool to forget it. That's why I am thrown overboard.'

'Not necessarily, madam. One may yet complement the other.'

'Incestuous thought!'

'No. Just an impulse to make amends for our failure to marry her daughter to your son.'

'How could it be so?'

'She is your major creditor. My conquest over her may leave a substantial balance in your favour.'

'If the conquest be hers, I may have to be a double debtor.'

'*I'll* be gainer still.'

'*I* may lose you too.'

'Jealousy, thy name is Woman!'

'What were you doing here?'

'Stealing.'

'The pro-note?'

'Yes.' And he showed her the packet.

'Give it to me.'

'No, it's my chief weapon of attack.'

'And spoil of war too, good boy! Let *me* have it.'

'Only on condition you permit my conquest.'

'Give that packet to me and you have it.'

'There! Get away!' And he threw it at her.

She picked it up anxiously and fled into her bedroom, when the door opened from without, admitting the pallid form of the young widow into the drawing room.

'If you won't accuse me, sister, of presumptuousness,' said M—'may I offer to place my acadamic qualifications at your disposal?'

'Your wife and children needyour company more than anybody else,' replied the widow.

'That flesh-bag and those "*accidents*" again! The intellectual companionship—the platonic feeling of spiritual oneness, my dear, is not there.'

'Words, mere words! Poetic myths, I should say! I don't believe in the existence of such a feeling at all. Love is a cultivable sentiment. That was why our Hindu Sastras encouraged early marriage.'

'How do you explain, then, this evergrowing feeling in me of one-ness with you even during all these days of your absence?'

'With me!'

'Does that surprise you? Your youth, culture, and opportunities—you must only thank yourself, if you let slip these and go on blaming the impotent stars.'

'You err in taking me to be a blue-stocking. My mother is my model for my monastic puritanism.'

'Your mother!' And he burst into a sarcastic laughter. 'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Why?'

'You spoke paradox.'

'Slanderer!'

'I've been discussing your future with your mother.'

'My future?'

'Yes. As it stands, it looks gloomy.'

'It's no discovery. A Hindu widow's future must ever be so.'

'But yours is dangerous too.'

'To whom?'

'To yourself first and to others next.'

'Why?'

'Your finances, your litigations, your safety, your honour—these are not small things?'

'What of that?'

'These need at once a full-time guardian.'

'That was why I booked a son-in-law.'

'He is out of the question now.'

'But temporarily.'

'Well, it's time for me to be more plain with you. The doctor is not quite sanguine about your girl's surviving this ordeal.'

'What?'

'He told me just now, when administering the sleeping draught, that her heart is not in order.'

The widow's throat became instantaneously parched. It was choked with sudden grief. She stared at vacancy, while he stood studying her psychoanalytically. 'And so?' she said, heaving a sigh, after a long pause.

'Up with the times and throw off widowhood!'

'And you discussed this with my mother?'

'Yes.'

'My mother permitted this?'

'The astrologer and the physician have both predicted the catastrophe. No use in grieving over the inevitable. You ought to view it only as a mixed evil, affording you greater freedom of action, that's all.'

'My mother permitted this!'

'You have time enough to think over.'

'My mother discussed this!' And she went out of the room distractedly repeating the words.

IV

'Where is she?' asked the mother re-entering from her bedroom.

'Gone, perhaps, to consult the doctor,' said M—.

'Why did you tell her?'

'She doesn't know the cause.'

'The doctor may find it out.'

'It's too late for a remedy.'

'Suspicion may lead to a post-mortem examination?'

'But it's impossible to suspect foul play in a grandmother.'

'Nor *was* it done purposely. You gave her the lotion for external application internally by mistake and discovered the error too late. It's nobody's *crime*, but mere *fate*.'

'A dead girl-child is ever better than an invalid one.'

With this he ran up to the cupboard and took out a bottle and two glasses, with a tray of the best English-made biscuits.

'Rash boy! Is this the time and place for your indulgence? If she should see this!' gasped the woman, hurriedly bolting the door.

'Damn her! Take it,' said he filling the glasses and thrusting one of them into her hands.

'This for your stealing,' she quaffed.

'This for your toxicological acumen.'

'This for young Adonis,' filling a second glass.

'This for my old Venus.'

'This'—filling two more cups.

'No more, please! My head is reeling already.'

'Weak-willed boy!—and yet you aspire to Don Juanism! Get away!'

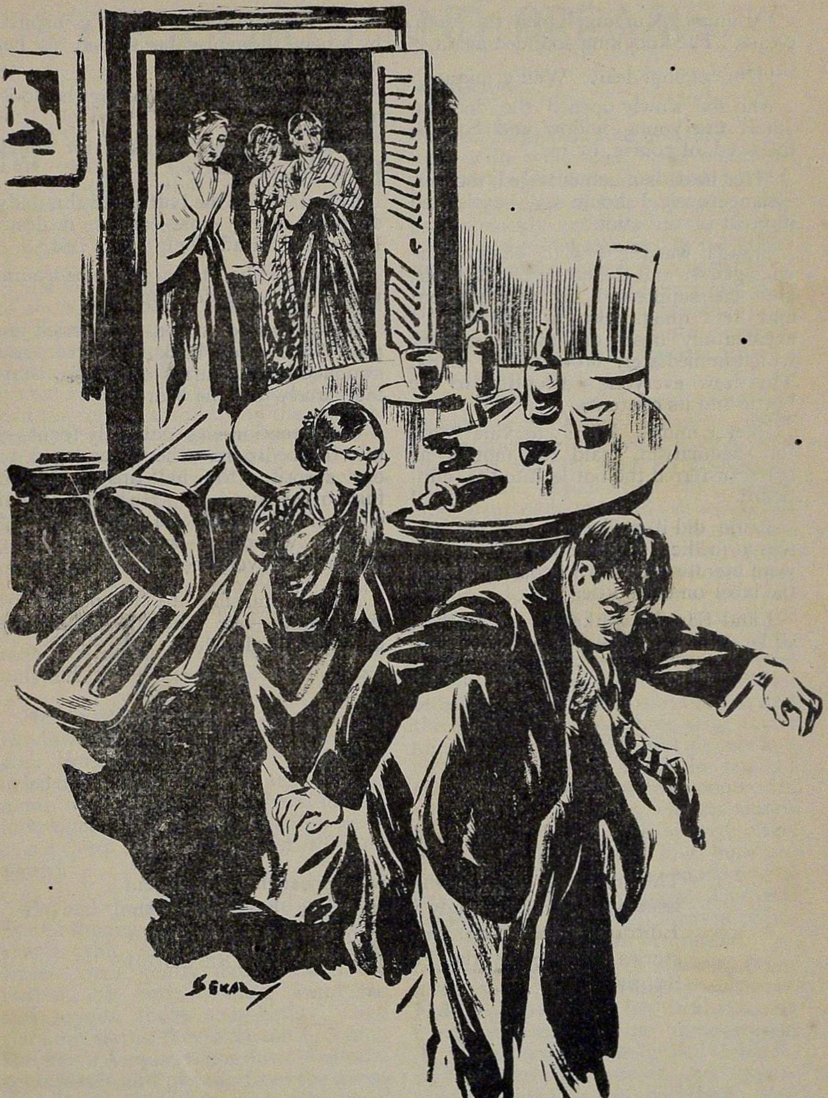
M—walked towards the door. But she prevented him 'No—that way, please!'

'To that room?'

'Yes, is it *new* to you?'

'Mummy! Mummy!' The widow called, knocking the drawing-room door from without.

'Get in, tipsy fool! If she but sees you in this state!' She pushed him into the bedroom in a hurry and bolted the door after him.



'He walked past us without a word, while the mother —our Mother—slipped out of the room after him.'

'Mummy! Mummy! Open the door, please.' The knocking sounded again.

'I'm coming, dear. Wait a minute.'

And she slowly opened the door to admit the young widow and Sarada, followed, of course, by me.

'Her heart is much enlarged, mother, —dangerously, I should say,' I exclaimed in great perturbation.

Sarada was the first to observe the wine-glasses and the bottle on the table. But she suppressed her astonishment and kept quiet. But in my hurry, I accidentally upset one of the glasses, which immediately broke with a clank. This drew everyone's attention to the bottle and its contents.

'Never mind! It's my nervine tonic for rheumatism,' said the mother as she transferred the bottle into the cupboard.

Little did it strike her that Sarada was a medical woman and the others were literate people who could decipher the label on the bottle.

I and Sarada winked at each other, while the widow's grief-stricken face fell. But instantaneously, as if inspired by a new thought, she turned to her mother and remarked :—

'Tonics do not need bolting the door, mother ?'

'They are often mistaken for something else, you know ?'

'The label on the bottle and this lady doctor's expert nose cannot mislead. I'm giddy, Sarada, help me to bed!'

Sarada led her towards the bedroom, while I threw its door open.

Suddenly and with a wild shriek the poor widow fell back in horror and swooned into the arms of Sarada, staring fiercely into the bedroom.

Our attention was naturally focussed into the bedroom, whence emerged, to our surprise, the half-tipsy red-eyed form of my friend M—. He held a lighted cigar in his hand and slowly walked past us without a word, but looking defiantly at everyone of us.

I stood transfixed to the spot, while the mother—*our* Mother—slipped out of the room after him.

[This story and another which will appear in a subsequent issue will form, Mr Aundy writes to say, his reply to the Editorial remark on the last of a series of his three stories published in the February issue, of THE SHORT STORY.—*Ed.*]

THOUGHTS AND DREAMS

By M. R. M. SUNDARAM

MANGALAM was as sweet as the sound of her name. She was made of that which roses and kokils are made, but she was born to blush unseen and her songs were left unheard.

She sat by the window and thought of her wasting life. She had just risen up from her usual siesta. Her face shone with spring but there was autumn in her deep dark eyes. Her lips were parted apart in childish abandon; she had the soul of a child and the unrestrained thoughts of one for her eighteen years. The tip of her shapely nose was slightly turned towards the sky as though in expectancy of a boon. When alone like this, mournful thoughts came crowding upon her but she always continued hoping that something might turn up to make her what she was made to be. She hoped and longed for unknown, unattainable things and these moods of continual longing and hoping only left on her bleeding scars and tears.

Her eyelashes moved between the window bars, like caressing wings. Her nose brushed against cold iron and inhaled the odour of rust. Her arms became numb after holding the bars for an interminable length of time. She was a caged bird. She thought of this and sighed.

Beyond the immediate road carpeted by the shadow of a row of houses, there was a thin cluster of trees. Their leaves were gently musical with the twitter of birds. They were free and joyous, those song-birds! They were not slaves, they were not brooding like her. A squirrel got down from the nearest tree and picking from the green ground a tiny nut with its paws cracked it in its mouth. Another squirrel got down from the same tree and caressed the first one. Then the twain ran playing and jumping up the tree. Mangalam watched these creatures with wide eyes. She could not revel in life like them, loving and loved.

She was married five years ago. She had to meekly lay hers in the rough hands of a stupid villager. In her childhood she had dreamt of a well-to-do, mannerly, good-looking, loving, husband. But her overworked, underpaid father was unable to pay the price for such a one; and hence her colourless life with a rough, lazy man.

Her husband was a land-owner, but he had not much land to own; and he had no mind to improve or enlarge even that little bit. He had no culture, no sense, no appreciation of things. Mangalam might be a bird but he was not an ornithologist; she might be a flower, but he was not a botanist. Anyone with an eye and a heart could not have helped adoring her; anyone with the least vision, with the least whisper of poetry in him. She did not aspire after rubies and diamonds or silks and velvets; she did not long for the luxury of a sedan, the intoxication of a theatre, and the other restless pleasures with which an ample purse could provide one in a city. No, she had craze for none of these. She loved the simple country life with its green and grey, with its sounds and echoes. What she aspired after, what she longed for was love, pure and simple love, and an understanding of her nature by her partner. This was denied to her, this high heaven of her life that was so easy to be granted.

Mangalam thought of this with brimming eyes. Times without number she had been beaten by her husband, and cursed by him to the meanest cur. Times without number he had threatened to strangle her throat and squeeze out her blood. He practised wife-molesting as an art, and like a true artist, he practised it for its own sake and strove to improve it to the stage of perfection.

Even now she could hear him howling and crying over a game of cards, two houses away. His figure floated before her mind. It was sickening to see his unbrushed hair that looked like straw, his mouth full of tobacco, his dirty cloth passing round his protuberant paunch. How many times had she tried to convert him into a respectable, tidy, mannerly man, to drag him from the wilds? But he had obstinately persisted in his kinship with the street man. In the long run she had wearied of her efforts. He continued joyously paying his respects to the king and queen of the world of cards, assiduously practising his individual art of wife-beating and drawing the inspiration necessary from tobacco.

Mangalam wept over her lot and shook the window bars in her distress.

Of late she herself had grown naughty, careless, and ugly. She had lost her former enthusiasm for housekeeping and personal adornment. The vessels in the kitchen looked dim and ashy like pumpkins. Her soup became sour. The house floor was a veritable cow-shed. The parting of her hair was imperfect. She put on the *kumkum* on her forehead without the help of a mirror. Her sari was like a gipsy's. All because her husband did not, appreciate beauty and taste, did not deserve them.

Mangalam gazed at the picture of herself some two years ago and held it in contrast with her present self. The one was gay, radiant, beaming; the other was dull, shadeless, worn-out.

For a moment she looked before her. She saw the green fields behind the trees and the grey river in floods beyond them. The green and grey kissed her eyes soothingly and the subdued chant of the river lulled them into somnolence. A tender string was touched. She was carried back through the years to the days of her childhood. One by one she met the familiar faces and was through many unforgettable incidents. She sighed over the shapes of her parents who were now no more, and glancing at a crowd of relatives, dwelt lingeringly on the figure of a boy-friend of hers. She fondly mouthed his name and smiled as though the person in her mind was really in her presence. She recollected all his gestures and words. Ah, how affectionate and devoted he was! She particularly remembered his oft-repeated playful words, 'Mangalam, you are the princess and I am the adventurous prince mentioned in fairy-tales.' Of course it was mere child's play. And yet, in course of time it would have burst into love. They would have walked, side by side, the same road, had it not been for the parting of the ways Where was he now? What was he doing? Did he remember her? Perhaps he was thinking of her the very same moment, who knows? Would it at all be possible to see him, just see him and talk a while, just a while?

Mangalam pulled at the reins; her horse was running wild! She, a married woman, ought not to think of an illicit love! Her mother's last words, 'however might be your husband your duty is to worship him' rang in her ears.

'Ace of spades!'

'Queen of Hearts!'

The players were crying in the adjacent house. Her husband's was the loudest: 'Queen of Hearts!'

From behind the house a donkey brayed.

Mangalam looked up the street. A little girl of three was crying out its heart. She tempted the child into her house with a doll. The child clasped the doll to her breast, became all radiant with happiness, and freeing herself from the furious kisses showered upon her, ran tripping towards the street. Mangalam stood for a while like an actress in a tableau. It had given her exceeding pleasure in caressing the child and witnessing its happiness. If appeared to her that nothing could be more blissful than the touch, the words, the smiles and even the tears of a child, of a child of her own. Would she have a child, a little bonny thing?

She would then bring it up with affection, nurse it herself and rock it with her own hands, to her own songs. She gently swayed to and fro involuntarily and lost herself in her dreams.

'Eh, what have you got for me, oh there, don't you hear? I am ablaze with hunger.' The words of her husband shattered her dreams.

She sprang into the kitchen and placed a plate and a tumbler in front of him. The vessels became coarsely empty in a moment.

'Do cast off that dirty cloth you are wearing, and wear a fresh one,' pleaded Mangalam.

'The slut is up again against me, is it? Where were you all this time? I look like a pig, do I? Which tongue it is that preaches to me? I shall soon see it bleeding, there!' He roared and glared at her, planning a proper course of action. But he remembered the play of cards he had left in the middle, and greatly regretting to leave her unpunished, rushed away, calling her names as far as the street.

She clasped her hands and muttered something between her teeth.

Hilarious laughter and cooing words interrupted by the lisping speech of a child reached her from the house to the left. They were the happiest couple Mangalam had ever seen. They understood one another and behaved in the most harmonious manner possible. To them bliss was on earth, in their very house. And they had a child too! A flame of jealousy shot up in her heart.

Mangalam looked about her with a harassed face. She wanted to flee from her crushing thoughts. The reality of her cursed life suffocated her. She wanted to fly. She felt she should climb hills and leap over valleys. But how to fly from *herself?*

With a pitcher on her hip she set out towards the river. From the corner of the street she looked towards the west. The sun was riding a golden chariot over the summit of high hills. She paused for a moment and then proceeded. She walked along a soft footpath, between green fields and tall trees. Her dress fluttered in the breeze. Herons and kites went flying over her. Locks of hair danced upon her brow. The slope of the path lent rhythm to her step. She glided like a swan along a stream, while her heart floated like a feather in a vacant sky. Mangalam forgot all her sorrow, all her pain. She was poised on the wings of a new joy; she was inhaling the air of a new atmosphere.

She was kneedeep in the river. The pitcher lay behind her. She was alone.

The rushing water dragged her legs down the river urgingly. She resisted the current playfully, and playfully she raised water in her hands and allowed it to escape down through her fingers, laughing like a child.

Suddenly, arresting her mirth, she peered into the depth of the water seriously.

What if she took a few more steps forward and allowed herself to be carried away towards the sea? Would not all her miseries come to an end? But had she the courage? Supposing she did have the courage, supposing she closed her eyes and leapt forward boldly, what would happen? She would throw up her arms, beat her legs and exhibit a vain struggle against Death? Would she or not? The feeling that she was drowning would certainly induce her to struggle. And she should fail, she must fail! And then? Life would be parted from her body and her body would sink and float down the river! But what would happen to her self, her self, the strange thing that was thinking out all these horrors? She could not probe into that mystery. Death was mysterions, it was uncertain!

Life, though it was bringing misery and pain to her, was at least *certain*. She was familiar to it. But Death! It was unknown to her, mysterious, abysmal! No, she would no more think of Death. Her body shiverd at what she had contemplated so far.

She filled her pitcher and hurried home with beads of perspiration on her brow. The sun had ridden down the other side of the hills, leaving a trail of golden dust behind.

She lit an oil lamp before the picture of Krishna and stood near it silently, palm pressed to palm, like one of those millions of granite devotee-girls that are standing through the ages at the portals of a thousand temples.

When the noises in the neighbourhood had died down, her husband knocked at the door. He took his supper, stuffed his mouth with tobacco, prowled about the house to the measure of his volley of complaints and misgivings, and growing tired, stretched himself clumsily on the bed.

Mangalam had finished her work in the kitchen. She found her husband snoring, with legs and arms thrown apart.

She went near the window and gazed at the silent stars and at the sad smile of the crescent moon. The trees stood with drooping boughs, with the least stir in their leaves. The river moaned against the rocks in the distance.

Mangalam moved away and blowing out the lamp mechanically, lay down on the bare ground, with her right arm for the pillow.

In her dream she dwelt in a garden, among birds and flowers, away from the thorns of her thoughts.

So potent is the word, the Lord of Life,
And so tenacious Art,
Whose instinct urges to perpetual strife
With Death, Life's counterpart;
The magic of their music, might and light
Can keep one living in his despite.

JAMES THOMSON

"AND MAN FULFILS HIMSELF..."

By P. G. SUNDARARAJAN

FOR no apparent reason Arjuna left the stage suddenly, in the middle of a love-scene. A moment later the curtain was rung down abruptly amid a hum of speculative murmur from the audience. Presently, the director of the performance appeared on the stage and apologised for having to stop the play in the middle, as the leading actor's presence was urgently required elsewhere.

At the wings, meanwhile, Mr Viswanathan, M. A., Lecturer in the City College, who was impersonating Arjuna, nearly fainted on reading a note that was just given to him. His wife's condition was dangerous and his presence was wanted at once. Suspecting that the fact was much worse, he tore off his wig and snatching his clothes ran downstairs where a friend's car was waiting. The play "Subhadra-Arjuna" presented by the Premier Amateurs at the Victoria Public Hall had to stop in the middle.

The next evening, the Secretary of the Premier Amateurs' Association had very sad news to report while talking to the President of the Young Women's Educational Home in aid of which the drama was staged. Hence it was with pardonable eagerness that some of the resident girls crowded over the evening papers to read with unbearable sorrow the piece of tragic news. The papers had prominently featured the news which was, to quote one of them, to this effect:—

'We regret to report the death at 10 p. m., yesterday, of Mrs Lakshmi Viswanathan, wife of Mr Viswanathan of the City College, one of our best and most popular amateur actors. It is unfortunate that the death occurred while Mr Viswanathan was absent from home as he was appearing on the stage at the V. P. Hall in one of his favourite roles. We understand that the deceased lady was suffering for some time from an attack of enteric fever, etc.'

An exclamation of sympathy broke out from the mouths of the girls while one of them, who did not join in the demonstration of feelings, moved away to hide her tears which were coursing down her cheeks. But this did not escape the notice of the girls who shook their heads in sympathy.

Messages of sympathy poured down from every individual and organisation known to the bereaved husband. It was an impressive meeting that met at the Y. W. E. H. to condole the death of Viswanathan's wife. A few days later, a rickshaw stopped before Viswanathan's house and there alighted a middle-aged woman, the President of the Y. W. E. H. and the girl who seemed so much affected by the tragic intelligence the other day. They passed the corridor in silence, catching a glimpse of Viswanathan who was huddled up in a chair in his study. In the hall Viswanathan's mother sat on a swing-plank in a preoccupied manner. Nearby on the floor Viswanathan's sister, a lady of twenty-two was reclining, idly gazing at her sleeping child. Her father, employed in a government department which took no notice of domestic calamities, and which incidentally had no holidays on its list, had left for his place having had only two days' leave through the indulgence of his superior. Viswanathan's parents-in-law, their work finished, and their connection dissolved as a result of the passing away of their daughter, had departed as soon as the obsequies were over.

As she saw the visitors the mother rose to welcome them but with a look of inquiry. The President introduced herself and began expressing her sympathy with the sorrowing mother. The latter, apparently exhausted in her power of lament requested the visitors to be seated and added in a resigned tone, 'Well, that was his fate. Who could have foreseen such a calamity?'

'I was shocked to know the details. To think that your son rushed home to find her dead—' the President stopped, seeing that she had roused the sorrow of the mother and daughter.

The protegee of the President who was sitting in the background hesitant as to the proper way of conducting herself in the circumstances, looked away to hide her emotion. In doing so she chanced to see Leela, the sister of the unfortunate Viswanathan. The latter was looking at her intently through her tears. A light of faint recognition appeared in the eyes of both. The next moment Leela ran to the girl.

'Is it you, Janaki?' she cried as she clasped her hands in glee—a strange piece of happiness in the midst of her grief.

'Yes, Leela,' murmured Janaki, 'but what a heart-rending thing it is to meet you now. How could one bear . . .'

But Leela turned to her mother. 'Mother, don't you know our Janaki?' she queried.

'Of course Leela; but how she has changed! Janaki, dear, I did not know you were in Madras.'

'She came here six months back and was admitted into our home,' explained the President. 'She is being trained as a nurse.'

'But why . . . ?' Both mother and daughter looked hard at Janaki who had dropped her head. They were speechless for a moment. Then the mother began embracing Janaki. 'It is unthinkable Janaki, that *you* should have come to such a state.' She wiped Janaki's tears while her own cascaded unchecked and her lips trembled. The mother who could no more weep for her son's sorrow was now bemoaning Janaki's fate in spontaneous grief. For Janaki's ere the lapse of the first year of her marriage, had arrived at that stage where the touch of saffron and the smell of flowers were forbidden her for ever. She was that accursed creature, that pitiable remnant of a broken wedlock—a widow.

Varied were the thoughts that flitted through the four feminine minds in that memorable moment of combined mourning. To the sorrowing mother, the presence of the girl who looked like a blasted plant seemed a strange coincidence; a crude revenge of fate; a dreadful death-knell. A widow to sympathise with a widower! And that the girl should be the same who was her son's playmate in his childhood, who would have been her daughter-in-law but for a minor discrepancy in the horoscopes! But had the marriage taken place would she have shared the fate of her dead daughter-in-law? Or, horrible thought, would her son have fell a victim to that terrible fate which had snatched the husband of this hapless girl?

Leela's thoughts were more subjective. She visualised two terrible phases of misfortune that could befall a girl; two examples of the utter indifference of fate. She shuddered with apprehension as she instinctively looked at her sleeping child. Was life after all so short, so purposeless? Were human beings mere toys of destiny that worked its course with machine-like precision. She shed scalding tears—for that was all she could do—knowing not for certain for whom she wept.

Very different were the thoughts of the President. Her connection with an institution such as the Home, had enabled her to stand by and see the whole pageant of tangled human afflictions pass by her. Experience had hardened her not without giving her its benefit. To her the scene seemed a re-enactment of a many another one, if with a more vivid touch of the irony of fate. She felt it her duty to put a stop to the state of affairs which was growing gloomier every moment. Her business was finished. She had in her official capacity expressed the sympathy of her institution with the bereaved family. She rose and beckoned to Janaki.

Janaki woke from her reverie with a start. The workings of her mind were simple. She had followed the President in her desire to express her sympa-

thy with a family which might have been her own had not the hand of the Inscrutable intervened. Now, she felt she was intruding upon it in its sacred hour of sorrow.

With more words of sympathy and endearment the visitors left. A bond of the closest friendship sprang between Janaki and Leela.

Limp and tired Viswanathan's mother lay on the swing-board. There was a deathlike silence. Leela could bear it no longer. She thought of her brother. Wondering how she came to forget him so long, she approached his room. He was sleeping with an open book upon his chest. His lips wore a tender smile. The haggard lines in his handsome face had disappeared at that moment. Was he dreaming of his wife, Leela wondered. She turned to leave the room fearing lest her presence should disturb his much-needed sleep. But Viswanathan awoke, recognising perhaps her presence in his none-too-sound sleep. In fact his sleep was the result of the drooping of his eyelids over tired eyes that had shed streams of tears. 'What is the matter Leela? Why are you going?'

'I just came in. You were sleeping and I did not want to disturb you.'

'Sleeping? No, I cannot get sleep. I want a long sleep—a long eternal one from which there is no waking up—just as she sleeps,' said Viswanathan trying hard to suppress his feelings that came surging to the brim of his heart at the thought of the departed one.

'No, Vichu, you should not speak like that.' Leela rebuked him with motherly tenderness; for it is inherent in the femenine soul, whether she is a lass of eight or a dame of eighty, to console an afflicted person with philosophic coolness, though she may not be certain whether she herself would be able to resist the rush of emotion. Left to herself the same female would break down at the most trivial thing. Such is the principle of balance that go to make that enigmatic being called the Eternal Feminine.

'Why should I not wish for that state of eternal oblivion?' asked Viswanathan. 'Could it be worse than the present?'

Leela realised that beyond those few words of consolation she could not cope with the rising emotional argument of her brother. She looked out for a way to change the topic.

'Did you see the President of the Home? She was here just now,' she asked.

'Oh, was it she? What a fool I was not to have thanked her. But I was asleep. Why didn't you tell me?'

'I wanted to. But there was another girl you know, Jan—' she bit her lip in regret, stopping abruptly.

'Who?'

'A girl from the institution. I forget her name. I had to speak to her and before I could inform you they had left. I am afraid the child is crying.' She hastily left the room cursing herself for introducing Janaki in their talk. Viswanathan was oblivious to her feelings. He did not know that the child was not crying. On the other hand he was a little sorry that he should have been so solicitous about a girl—a stranger.

It was a Monday morning, a month or more after his wife's death. Viswanathan was starting for his college in spite of his mother's asking him to take a few months' leave to ensure rest for his broken health. If he must have rest, it must be the endless one, he grimly reflected as he gathered his books. As he was arranging his necktie a paragraph in an old daily caught his attention. He had scarcely read any paper since the tragic night. He scanned the paragraph with mild interest. It was a report of the condolence meeting held at the Y. W. E. H. He read:—

'At a meeting held at the Young Women's Educational Home Miss

Janaki moved a resolution recording the Home's deep sense of sorrow at the premature demise of Mrs Viswanathan. The President spoke in moving terms of . . . '

He did not read further as it recalled a wave of conflicting emotions. But that name Janaki was familiar. He could not recall where he had heard it before. Then reproaching himself for thinking about an unknown lady, he left for the college.

The enthusiasm of the students to have him again in their midst was unmistakable just as their sympathy was inexhaustible. In teaching Poetry to the undergraduates, Viswanathan found that his lectures were not so good as they used to be. Many an occasion there was when, overcome by the similarity between his emotions and those expressed in certain poems, he had to stop in the middle. Then craving their pardon he would dismiss the class for the day unable to proceed in his then state of mind.

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One February evening, he was walking along the seashore in a forlorn way when he was accosted by a friend.

'Vichu! I thought you were out of Madras. How is it I don't see you at the club nowadays? What is this, my dear fellow, you look like a ghost!'

Viswanathan did not answer. He gazed upon the distant horizon where a tiny catamaran showed as a minute speck, the only blot on a clear seascape.

'Why don't you speak, Vichu? Oh yes, of course. What a fool I was, not to have remembered! You have been taking your wife's death too much to heart. If you, a poet and philosopher, do not realise the destiny of human beings, who else would? Surely you don't need another man to advice you?'

Viswanathan smiled at his friend in a dry manner. They sat down beside a pile of ropes. Neither spoke for some moments and the dry smile lingered a the corners of Viswanathan's lips.

At length, his friend remarked more to relieve the embarassment. 'By the way, did you go to the play of the City Amateurs? I wonder how these people come on the stage unashamed.'

The last words were full of significance to Viswanathan. 'No, I did not go. I have sworn not to see a drama nor to appear in one. If anybody ought to be ashamed it is I.'

'Vichu, you are again going back to that fatal day. You should not spoil your health like this,' broke in his friend. 'It is eight months since the thing happened and you have not got over it yet. This was not new to you alone, you should know. People have been and still are suffering from worse calamities.'

Viswanathan laid his hand upon his friend's shoulder and looked him in the eye.

'Ramu, do you know what she meant to me? Do you know the circumstances under which she passed away? Can you imagine the scene? I was returning . . . '

'Now, Vichu, please don't,' interrupted Ramaswamy, fearing that Viswanathan was about to break into a flood of sentiment. 'I beg you not to go over it all again.'

'No, Ramu, you mistake me. You think I am going to break down. But I am not. You must know the truth,' continued Viswanathan doggedly. 'I was returning hurriedly from the performance of a drama—a drama written by a man's imagination; acted by another's imagination. But at home fact surpassed fiction. Life exceeded Drama in its intensity. I rushed home in half make-up and in the pampered livery of the stage to see her dead—to find her beyond human reach for ever. I was enjoying myself while she was suffering. I knew she was ailing for some time. Still I put myself before her in the deluded belief that I was serving Art and the Public. It is the curse of my

'The memory is terrible ; the experience more than enough.'
He stopped as if exhausted by his own self-castigation.

life: I seem to be happy while my near and dear ones are suffering. And then as if my own contrition were not enough, Fate mocks me. It makes me look like a clown. It did that night. How my wife should have called for me the very moment when I was making love to a man dressed as a woman on the stage! What a hollow mockery, Ramu, what a lesson, what a bitter lesson to self-deceivers like me!'

'No, Vichu, you taught a lesson to others. You sacrificed a great thing for the sake of Art; something that no man would ever dare to. And you ought to be proud of yourself as the world is proud of you.'

'You are deceived, Ramu, as every other person was, including myself,' continued Viswanathan with a dry laugh. 'I did not do it for Art. I was selfish. I wanted to earn a name; I wanted to be prominent in the public eye. And I have realised my ambition; but in what manner? At what a price? No; I shall never get upon the stage hereafter. The memory is terrible; the experience more than enough.' He stopped as if exhausted by his own self-castigation.

Ramu was a man of the world. Some people even called him a cynic. He saw that his friend was indulging in sheer sentimentality.

'Come on; let us go. It is late. He rose and Viswanathan involuntarily followed him. As they parted, Ramu extended an invitation to Viswanathan to accompany him to a cinema show the next evening. Viswanathan, however, declined it saying that he would be poor company.

Tracing his steps homeward Viswanathen wondered whether he was not mistaken in refusing his friend's invitation. After all, what was he going to gain by keeping himself at home? And how long could he carry on in that gloomy manner? But anyhow he had refused the invitation and there was an end of it.

Ramu knew better. Despite Viswanathan's refusal, he arrived at his house the next evening and casually enquired whether Viswanathan would like to go to the pictures with him. Viswanathan realised that he was being given a second chance. He debated awhile within himself.

'Still adamant?' Ramu asked.

Forced thus, Viswanathan began, 'Well, if you are particular about my company I have no objection. Only I don't feel like enjoying anything.'

Ramu checked himself from retorting that it was not to trifle with Viswanathan that he came all the way. Knowing that it would spoil the situation, he adopted a conciliatory attitude.

'Of course I am particular. Don't you see how anxious I am to make you forget your sorrow?'

'All right, then; I will come,' Viswanathan assented in a resigned tone.

Once inside the theatre, Viswanathan's gloom disappeared. Ramu had adroitly led him to a discussion about acting and Viswanathan had warmed to the subject. They talked about the comparative merits of American, Indian, and British actors, until the titles of the day's film were flashed on the screen. The story was featuring one of the best actors of the American screen and Viswanathan had entirely forgotten himself. He was captivated by the advertisement of the player and found himself wondering whether he would ever reach such histrionic heights. The interval also found him discussing the film; and Ramu inwardly congratulated himself on having succeeded in making his friend happy at least for the time being.

The next evening at the seashore, the two friends were again discussing drama. But Viswanathan, confused as he was by conflicting thoughts, did not notice that Ramu was often harking back to the capacity of Viswanathan himself. Any one (that is, any one free from emotional stress) could have noticed that Ramu had a definite purpose in pursuing that line of talk. After a while, when Viswanathan was waxing elo-

quent upon the utter hopelessness of the amateur performances, Ramu, quickly noticing the psychological moment, spoke: 'Well, Vichu, what you say is the lamentable truth. What we want is a man with brains and an artistic bent of mind. Who else could be the right man than yourself? Our club is proposing to stage "Sakuntala" and the conductor is at his wits' end as to the casting of the leading male role.'

All this, Ramu spoke in a hurried manner keeping his eyes averted from Viswanathan. Getting no reply, he turned and found Viswanathan looking at him with a pathetic smile. The words of Ramu had suddenly brought Viswanathan to earth from his inward repentance. He was cursing himself for having enjoyed the cinema show and for having talked about acting.

'No, Ramu. I have been a fool, I ought to have known better than to have forgotten so soon that it was the artistic bent of mind that deprived me of . . .' he stopped and looked away at the far-off gleam of the lighthouse to hide his tears. As he gazed at the revolving light, he told himself that there was a kindred spirit in it.

It was moving round itself even as his own mind was running round the vicious circle of repentance and oblivion. But the next moment he understood the unfathomable distinction, the imcomparable difference between himself and the beacon-light. The lofty illumination, by its very inconstant revolutions, was diffusing rays of hope to the mariners while his mind, circling through a grief-stricken orbit was shedding patches of dark despair all around him. In that brief moment of confused thoughts he came to the conclusion that his presence upon the earth was quite useless.

'I am sorry, Vichu.' These words fell upon Viswanathan's ears like a faint murmur from the far-off horizon. 'I thought that from the way you talked, your love of drama had asserted itself. Now I find you are still thinking of the past incident.'

'What else can I do, Ramu, while what you call "the incident" was so inextricably connected with my passion for drama; while my selfishness was more a cause than a coincidence of the tragedy? Do you know, Ramu, that no punishment is sufficient for the like of me? No; not even this mire of remorse in which I am wallowing.'

'Look here, Vichu, this has got to end somehow,' cut in Ramu impetuously. 'I think there is no use of my being a friend of yours unless I get you out of this false sense of self-imposed punishment. Answer me this: Is it because you are afraid of the painful recollections that you do not want to act again?'

'Yes.'

'Then, you would be comparatively at peace with you if you have no occasion to be reminded of the tragic affair. Is that so?'

'Yes. Moreover I can avoid being irreverent to the memory of my wife.'

'Don't you think that it is inevitable as time goes on that you should forget her in the normal course of things?'

'It is possible.'

Ramu laughed. 'My dear fellow, you are not sure of yourself. Do you mean to tell me that you can forget it when you have nothing else to turn your mind to? As a matter of fact you shrink from the very recollection of the affair. Strangely enough, only yesterday the diversion afforded by the film succeeded in making you forget your gloom and brighten up. It is a psychological fact, Vichu, that if you want to forget a thing it could be done only when there is some other thing to occupy your mind.'

'But I do not want to forget it. It will be a greater sin. Painful as it is, the remembrance will adequately reproach me for my selfishness.'

'Now, now, Vichu, you are confusing yourself. You do not want to forget it. But you think that the passage of time will obliterate the trace of the memory. But as a matter of fact, you

want to forget it subconsciously at least. It is your conscious self which deludes you into the false belief that you are right in self-infliction and hides the fact that you are shrinking from the very thought of recollection. There is only one way, Vichu, and you must have known it, the keen psychologist you are. Face the thing. Defy the conspiracy of circumstances. You will have achieved your wish then. By looking at it on the face, you would, as you say, be sufficiently punished when the full significance of the thing unfolds itself before you. Again you will be able to look at the tragedy and your acting as two separate entities unconnected with each other. You must got out of this self-deception.'

There was silence for a few minutes. Already Viswanathan's mind was dwelling upon the tragedy and he was trying to look unemotional. Noticing this, Ramu added, 'I am sorry, Vichu, perhaps I have made a blunder in talking like this without regard to your feelings. Pardon me, will you?'

'That is all right Ramu. I know you mean well. I realise the truth of your logic. Yet, you know the state of my mind. How do you expect me to accept the grim truth of cold facts so suddenly?'

When the friends parted, Ramu was glad that he had not only provided food for thought to Viswanathan but also impressed him with his own philosophy. So sincere was Ramu about his mission of seeing Viswanathan once more on the stage that he was completely ignorant of the fact that his words were harassing the already troubled mind of Viswanathan.

It was a different Viswanathan that entered his house that night—not quite different though; only his mind was shaken. The calm waters of the little pool were disturbed by a forcible wind. He was excited and failed to disguise it. The perpetual gloom of previous days had given place to an irrepressible tumult. Viswanathan felt like a brooding fowl that for some reason fluttered in the air suddenly, leaving its brooding. Slowly he gathered courage to tell himself that he was not wise in thinking over what was past and in neglecting himself for so long. Strange, that he did not realise it till then, he thought.

After this, the friends used to meet quite often and Ramu perceived with pleasure the beneficial change that gradually overcame Viswanathan. Nor did this escape the notice of Viswanathan's mother and sister. In fact both of them had by their unerring instinct beheld the first effects of the change and hailed with secret joy the improvement. The haunted look in his eyes was no more seen and his haggard face regained its usual health and vigour. After all, how long does the memory of a deceased beloved linger in the ever-fluctuating human mind, though, as it did in the case Viswanathan, it is sometimes apt to flash with great intensity?

But Ramu had great difficulty in persuading Viswanathan to visit the rehearsals of the new drama at their club. In his vow of never ascending the stage again, Viswanathan seemed to be unassailable. But at last Ramu succeeded more by the help of elements than by his own eloquence. One evening, they were going along the street where the club had its premises and suddenly rain descended in torrents. Seizing the opportunity Ramu dragged his friend into the club which they were passing. Realising that neither of them had an umbrella Viswanathan had to follow reluctantly.

He was hailed with unalloyed joy by the members who had not seen him for a long time and to whom his visit was an event. A rehearsal of Kalidasa's "Sakuntala" was in progress. The confused prattle and the music aroused happy memories within Viswanathan. When he was reminded that it also led to tragedy, he told himself that it was sheer folly to attribute it to the drama. He marvelled at his own audacity and assured himself that his thoughts did not necessarily mean irreverence to his wife. Soon he forgot everything else and voluntarily suggested ideas to the players who were rehearsing. Finally he

was forced to guide them by his own example. Though reluctant, he complied with their request and began to portray the leading male character, namely Dushyanta, for their benefit. So perfect and masterly was his performance, in spite of the fact that it was many months since he last acted, that even the conductor among others, sat spellbound through the brief period, little realising that it was only an informal rehearsal. The inevitable result was that at the end there was a general clamour to the effect that he should take the part; and before he realised it, he had given his consent to play the leading role. Once more the club's favourite, the star of the Premier Amateurs! Everybody was pleased—most of all Ramu.

'What have I done!' he exclaimed within himself that night when his thoughts about the drama, pursuing the natural course of events step by step, culminated in the final performance; when, his imagination refusing to be restrained, flashed back to the tragic night. Then followed the usual self-reproach and he determined to decline his consent the next day by writing to the Secretary. But the next evening found him rehearsing at the club as also all the other following evenings. It was a matter for secret pride to Viswanathan—though he refused to own it to himself—that he had succeeded in detaching the painful incident from the pleasurable occasion.

March was drawing to its close. The play was to be staged in the first week of April. One day there arrived a letter from Viswanathan's father. While Viswanathan was reading it, Leela and her mother waited impatiently for the news. But Viswanathan was not communicative.

'What is it, Vichu; why don't you tell us anything? Is anything wrong?' asked his mother. In reply Viswanathan smiled and drew forth another piece of paper from the envelope and gave it to Leela.

'Oh, it is a horoscope! Who are the people, Vichu? What does father say?' Leela poured out her questions.

'I don't know,' replied Viswanathan with a total lack of enthusiasm. 'Somebody in Madura. Father says that as the horoscopes agree I might go and see the girl.'

'And when are you going?' Leela asked.

'When? Not in the near future.'

'What? Do you mean to refuse the offer?' his mother asked.

'I am surprised, mother, that you should put such a question. The disregard of the girl's people for my feelings is pardonable since they cannot be expected to understand me. But that you should be talking like this when it is not even a year since . . . her death, is, well, it is strange.'

'But Vichu, are you still thinking about it? It is past. What is the use of recalling it now. Think of yourself; think of the pleasure it will give us to see you happy.' You do not realise that what you need is a companion to keep you happy and comfortable,' explained his mother with a deal of truth.

'Yes, Vichu,' supplemented Leela, 'how long are you going to remain like this? Consider your future.'

'Oh! Is that how you feel about it? Of course you cannot help it. To you she was only a stranger. A girl from somewhere who passed into nowhere. But it is not easy for me to look at it that way.' There was a tinge of forlorn pathos in Viswanathan's voice.

'Oh no, Vichu! You have misunderstood me. Oh, why did I talk like that!' Leela touched to the quick, broke into tears.

'What is this Leela, don't. I have been a fool. I ought to have had more sense. But I talked in my emotion. Please forgive me.'

After a pause, his mother asked him: 'Vichu, don't think we are pressing you against your will. But, what are you going to write to your father? He may be particular about your going there since he himself has written to you.'

'I will explain to him,' said Vichu. 'Moreover, I have no time to go out of

Madras.' He thought that this evasive reply would stop the discussion.

'Why not? Your college would be closed soon and you will be free,' put in his mother with reason.

'But I have my drama.' The words fell out of Viswanathan's lips suddenly before he realised that he had divulged a secret which he had kept from them so long.

'Drama!' echoed mother and sister simultaneously.

'Yes, I am acting in a new drama which is to come off in ten days.' Noticing the look of scandalised horror in their eyes Viswanathan turned away.

His embarrassment increased when both of the ladies kept silent. Fully conscious of his sense of guilt, he said: 'I know you are angry with me for taking up acting in spite of my resolve to the contrary. But you should know that the public will not understand my feelings. They look forward to me for entertainment and I ought to satisfy them. Moreover it would keep my mind away from painful thoughts.'

'Why should we be angry, Vichu? On the other hand we are glad that you are gradually recovering yourself. I only wish that you look upon your prospective marriage in the same light. As I told you, marriage alone can give you the much needed permanent solace for which you seek in drama,' emphasised his mother.

As before Viswanathan realised the truth of the statement. Now, after what he had confessed, he could not put forward sentimental objections to the projected marriage. In a way he was glad that he had explained himself. Seeing that he could no more blame his mother and sister than himself for lack of reverence to his dead wife, he replied, 'Well, mother, I only thought that the marriage could wait for some time. If it would please you I shall certainly do what father has asked me as soon as the drama is over.'

As the day of the performance drew near Viswanathan found himself much excited. The memory of the day kept presenting itself in his thoughts and he struggled hard to keep it in the background. At the final rehearsal Ramu noticed his state of mind and tried to console him with platitudes from his repertoire of half-baked philosophies. Though his mental agitation did not interfere with his work, Viswanathan was not sure whether he would be able to go through the performance on the stage. Yet he could not recede for all his feverish feelings. He must attend and act. To turn back now, would be to show to an unappreciative world, the strange depth of his emotions.

Leela and her mother knowing that he was confused within himself, tried to divert his attention away from the gloomy topic by talking of other things. While discussing the performance the next evening, Leela asked her brother to get three tickets for her. To Viswanathan's look of inquiry, she answered: 'You see, I have a friend. A girl from the institution. I want to take her to the play.'

'Is that the lady who presented you with those pictures and fancy things?' asked Viswanathan, who made no secret of his admiration of the work of this unseen lady, turning towards a row of pictures finished with glittering artistic material.

'Yes, Vichu,' put in his mother who just then happened to come into the hall. 'Janaki is very clever at those things. She was never tired of admiring your acting.'

Viswanathan sat up. 'Janaki!' he exclaimed. 'Is she by any chance the same girl from our place?'

Leela had no intention of revealiy the identity of Janaki. She had deliberately seen to it that Janaki and Viswanathan never met each other. But now that her mother had a inadvertantly undid her work of concealment, she thought she had better explain.

'Yes, Vichu, she is the same Janaki, your childhood playmate about whom you were particular. You remember

that we had to give her up since the horoscopes did not agree.'

'But what is she doing in an institution?' Viswanathan shot out the question with forced vehemence. 'I hope she has not . . .' He stopped dreading to pronounce what he thought.

'Yes. She has, poor girl,' commented Leela simply.

Viswanathan was visibly touched. He was overwhelmed by the tragic coincidence. He sought the privacy of his room to brood over this new intelligence. Now, his mind went back even beyond the day of his wife's death. He visualised a witty winsome girl who took pleasure in teasing him. He could ill reconcile this picture with that of another Janaki shorn of all maidenly glory. He recollected the report of the meeting. So *she* moved the resolution! 'Good good! Janaki, a widow! And I thought I was the most miserable creature!' he muttered within himself and sank into a chair.

*

Amid the confusion in the green-room at the Victoria Public Hall on the 5th of April, Viswanathan, made up as Dushyanta, paced the floor mumbling his lines excitedly. His mind was occupied with two things—a dead girl and a young widow. He was getting feverish every moment. His heart pounded against his ribs as the curtain rose on the first act amid an expectant murmur. He found himself pushed on to the stage by the prompter. For the first time he felt nervous. The whole auditorium was a vast blur on his sight. He finished his song mechanically. He went through his part without any conscious effort. The curtain fell on the end of the scene. The same automatic piece of acting was gone through in other scenes. But the audience failed to notice anything wrong with the man. Though there were many rounds applause, Ramu knew, as he watched his friend from the wings, that at any moment Viswanathan might collapse. But all went well till the climactic scene. Viswanathan sang a good number of songs in the best traditions of the Tamil stage and repeated some on demand by the audience.

The whole audience was keyed up as the climax of the play approached. Sakuntala entered and sang a plaintive air. She began a speech and was promptly disowned by the king on the throne. This repudiation was followed by the famous pleadings of Sakuntala. To all her entreaties the king turned a deaf ear. Viswanathan registered scorn and indifference with marvellous effect. But his mind was elsewhere. His realisation of the character of Dushyanta who was neglecting his wife brought home to him a past fact. Yet with wonderful self-restraint he played his part brushing aside his personal feelings. But the man who played Sakuntala quickly noticed that Dushyanta failed to take his cue. So he continued his speech for some more minutes with his own additions suitable to the occasion. 'Ah, my lord, what an unlucky wretch I am! You have forgotten me, your wedded wife, so soon. And you are enjoying yourself. I am cruelly neglected. May God have pity on me!' With this Sakuntala made her exit.

The audience, on the point of applauding the magnificient acting and exit of Sakuntala, received a rude shock. They saw what they did not expect to see on the stage. Scarcely had Sakuntala left the scene when Dushyanta rose from his throne, his hand on his forehead, toppled over and fell crashing down on the stage. Some thought that it was an original piece of acting by Viswanathan. For a few moments everybody, including the other actors on the stage, were struck dumb. Then, suddenly, for the second time in the history of the Victoria Public Hall the curtain was rung down in the middle of a play.

Confusion reigned supreme among the audience. History was repeating itself. Another play stopped in the middle! Somebody appeared on the stage and shouted something. 'Mr Viswanathan has fainted!' The cry went forth from mouth to mouth. Simultaneously seven doctors from the audience rushed to the stage. Police

'Who is that person, if I may ask?' Janaki spoke in a husky tone, averting her head.

constables appeared from nowhere and forced the crowd to the exits.

The final words of Sakuntala had been too much for the overstrung Viswanathan. The effect was instantaneous inasmuch as the exact wording of the end of the speech was a matter of momentary inspiration to the person who played Sakuntala. The words meant some grim significance to him; they sounded like an accusation from his departed wife and his faculties got out of control.

A well-known doctor was restoring Viswanathan's consciousness while Leela, her mother, Janaki, and Ramu looked on with anxious faces. When Viswanathan recovered consciousness and strongly protested against somebody's suggestion of going to the General Hospital, he was taken home with special care.

At home the doctor assured Viswanathan's mother and sister that the patient was all right but that he should have complete rest for a long time.

'We are glad that nothing serious has happened, doctor,' interposed Ramu. 'I know it is his heart. It was very bad.'

'What do you know about the heart, young man? It is not heart,' snapped the doctor, who, in common with his fraternity cherished a hearty contempt for the laymen presuming to know anything about the mysteries of medical science. Then he added with an air of importance, 'It is nerves!'

As he prepared to leave, the doctor turned to Leela's mother. Her son must have constant attention. The services of a nurse were essential. Could they get one or should he arrange for one. Janaki, who was there all along, promptly volunteered her services, feeling secretly grateful for the chance of attending upon her quondam playmate.

The next evening, the newspapers ended the piece of news regarding the play at the Victoria Public Hall with:—'It will be recalled that last June a performance of the same club had to be stopped in the middle . . . etc,' and worked up the story in their own way. Viswanathan's father arrived to be at his son's side, daring the wrath of a machine-like public service. Viswanathan was gradually making progress though his mental faculties were a little dazed.

*

A month had passed. One afternoon Leela, noticing that Janaki had not yet taken her evening coffee, proceeded to the convalescent's room to see whether Viswanathan really needed the attention that Janaki's absence indicated. As she was about to enter she heard voices and stopped.

'No, Janaki,' Viswathan was saying, 'I wish I had joined her. If I were to live, there is only one who can make my life worth-while. And I don't know whether that person will care for me.'

'Who is that person, if I may ask?' Janaki spoke in a husky tone, averting her head.

'Need you ask that question? Don't you know it is yourself? No; please don't be offended. I do not mean that you do not care for me after all you have done for me these dark days. But would it not be cruel of me to ask you to take a second place, to give you a broken heart? I know if you accept the broken heart you will mend it ere long. But will you accept me? Will you, Janaki?' He stopped, exhausted by his emotional exertion.

Leela concluded that what she was suspecting had come true. But she hated eavesdropping. She did not want to pry upon Janaki. So suppressing her curiosity at this crucial moment she returned to her mother, her mind assailed with doubts about custom, public opinion, and tradition. These three things also occupied the troubled mind of Janaki. She wanted to satisfy Viswanathan, to shout at him her joyous consent. But she realised her tantalising position. She knew that she was having vain hopes about a mirage in the dreary desert of her life.

'You should not talk like that—please,' she answered fully alive to the cold realities of prosaic life. 'You must understand that there is an un-

bridgeable gulf between us though we are afflicted by a kindred sorrow. But there is yet hope for you. You must choose some other person on whom the curse has not fallen.' She lowered her face to hide her tears and toyed with a medicine bottle.

Viswanathan rose with a defiant gleam in his eyes. Resting on his elbows, he began: 'Look here, Janaki. Think of our past childhood. We are destined to go through life together. I see it all clearly now. Our partners were torn from us that we may meet again. The gulf you talk about is mere illusion. There is a greater thing which can bridge any bottomless chasm. Janaki!' (he grew pathetic) 'You alone can get me out of this gloom. If you refuse, this will prove my last bed. Accept me and save me Janaki, darling!' He sank down once again perspiring all over. Janaki, alarmed at this, felt his forehead and reached for the thermometer, her duty foremost in her mind. But she was not allowed to take her hand off his forehead. It was clasped firmly by the warm pulsating hand of Viswanathan.

The following June saw the marriage of Viswanathan and Janaki—a marriage which some called 'a social reform' one.

Here's one of the truest paradoxes in the world; the one way to secure the future is to defy it joyously. Then the present is healthy and rich, and great things can grow out of it. You must, so to speak, damn the future, that the future may not be damned. —Ernest Raymond

AMBITION PAYS

By L. S. RAMAMRITAM.

I COULD not contain myself any longer. ' It is simply lovely,' I began.

Yes, it was really fine—the scenery seen through the window.

There were the beautiful pool, surrounded by mango trees, and the cattle grazing the green pasture. Now and then the white of a crane's neck flashed in the fading light of the setting sun and shadows of flocks of birds returning to their roost fell on the grass. It *was* beatiuful. A painter or a snapshot camera artist would have given his right eye to get a scene like this either on canvas or on lens.

' It is fine,' I began again, casting a sidelong glance at the gentleman, who was seated opposite to me, smoking a cigarette. He was generally spoken of among us as the Enigma when he was not near by, and we addressed him while talking to him as Uncle or Sir.

He was a strange man—this Enigma; the expression suited him perfectly and he continued to live up to it from the time he first appeared among us, and that was about a year ago. He possessed a striking personality and had a manner of talking and a way of moving about that demanded a certain amount of respect from you—in spite of you. He didn't talk much and was as close as an oyster, and yet he was a very desirable companion, in spite of his reserve. But at the same time you would hate to see him in a fury. His eyes would then gleam and shoot forth such flames of fire, that— pardon me —however brave you might be, you couldn't help knocking your knees together and stammering muttered words of apology and regret and fear. But that happened very rarely.

He was learned, we found out, and rich. He spent recklessly and his one vice was his cigarettes and his cigars. He would smoke. and smoke—but still nothing happened to his stalwart frame. The cigarette smoke served to increase the glamour about him. In short, he reminded me, often and very much of that immortal creation of Alexandre Dumas—Edmond Dantes, the man-hater, dark and gloomy, masterful and haughty, brooding and mysterious—and so there is a pen-picture of the Enigma for you.

'It is simply marvellous—the scenery,' I ventured to say a third time.

The Enigma growled—his way of showing his assent. Carelessly, he threw away the cigarette stub, and leaned forward to light a fresh one. As he did so, his eyes accidentally fell on the setting sun, the pool, the mango trees around it, and the cattle grazing beneath, and I was struck with the sudden change that came over his face. His eyes, all of a sudden, became ferocious, and his face pale, while his jaws snapped. I watched him, fascinated. His eyes slowly became soft and dreamy, and he muttered softly as if to himself.

' Yes, it is fine—it *is* fine,' he said slowly.

' Fine! ' I echoed in rapture.

He turned his face towards me. 'Yes, it is good.'

'How very wonderful it would be if some music was played here just now, at this very moment, in this very place,' I whispered in ecstasy. ' This would become a veritable paradise—what a magnificent subject for a painter—an artist—a poet !'

He looked strangely at me when I finished, relieving myself of my feelings.

'I have myself heard some wonderful music in same such surroundings, as this pool, these trees, this setting sun and the cattle.' His voice was a bit soft.

'Ah, have you?' I asked him in delight. 'How have you felt. Was it not wonderful?'

'Yes, I have heard some music—wonderful music—a work of inspiration—an achievement. I heard it under strange circumstances.'

I waited breathlessly. He sat looking at his cigarette for some minutes and spoke again:—

'Yes, really wonderful music and under strange circumstances; and the strangeness about it was that none witnessed the performance, except the performer himself and a dying woman. Would you like to hear how it happened?' he asked abruptly. Would I like? I was afraid to speak—of joy. I clasped my hands and nodded eagerly.

And he began.

II

About seven or eight years ago, if someone had passed by or taken the trouble to go into the thick wood lying near the village D—(about two hundred miles from here) he would have found a shepherd boy, about eighteen years old, sitting under a spacious banyan tree, playing on a flute, while his cows grazed a few yards away from him. And near him, with her hands folded on her lap, sat a pretty young girl of about thirteen listening in rapt attention to his music. Her large innocent eyes never ceased to look away from his face. They were fixed in a steadfast gaze of great love. They were both employed and fed by Govinda Chetti, the richest man in D—. He took the Chetti's cows every day to the forest, to graze, and served as a shepherd boy, while she washed vessels, and did other menial tasks in the same house, and served as a servant-maid. He was a poor orphan, and she was a foundling. Every day she brought him his food of rāgi, his betel, and looked to all his wants. Thus, there existed between them a bond of something that was more than ordinary friendship. But they knew not then, what it was, for they were young and innocent. Every evening, and sometimes when the gentle wind shook the forest leaves and the white full moon shed its silvery rays over the pool under the banyan tree, he would sit there and play on his flute, while she nestled near him, her hands resting on his feet, and her face raised up, her eyes looking at him, lost in the charms of his music, and in admiration of him. And thus these two grew side by side, happy and contented, till a day came when an event occurred which resulted in the destruction of this beautiful idyll.

On that day, he was as usual sitting under the tree, playing on his flute and his friend seated near him, her eyes closed in ecstasy. He finished with a flourish, and she woke up with a start, and clapped her hands delightedly.

'Oh, you are wonderful!' she whispered.

He smiled a proud indulgent smile, and stroked her hair. And as he lifted the flute up to his lips again, suddenly a voice from behind started them both.

'You *are* wonderful, my dear lad.'

They turned round quickly, and saw before them a stout man about forty-five years of age, pompously dressed, and fingering a gold chain that dangled from his watch-pocket. The gentlemen smiled.

'You *are* good, you play the flute rather well.' He pulled out a silk handkerchief with a sweep and wiped his gold rimmed spectacles.

Both the young people were struck with awe of this pompous intruder.

'H'm, good, what is your name, boy?' His voice was inviting and sweet. The shepherd gathered some courage.

'Gopal,' he said in a low, awestruck voice.

'Gopal—Gopal—a good name,' the gentleman replied, 'and say, what are you doing—I mean for your living?'

He stooped and a rupee dropped apparently accidentally from his pocket and the boy's and the girl's eyes followed its motion, as it rolled and fell into the pool. The shepherd boy moved forward to pick it up, but the strange gentleman waved his hand.

'Ah, don't mind that, I can spare a lot more to drop and be lost—ah, you see—I am not very particular about that rupee, and now my dear Gopal, what do you say to a little arrangement with me. ? You don't know me, but yet I say, never mind—do you see, eh ?' He fingered the gold chain and felt each link. The boy and the girl listened in silent wonder to this person who was an absolute stranger to them, and in spite of that, was offering to enter into an agreement with the shepherd boy.

The stranger allowed a full minute to pass in effective silence after his staggering statement and then resumed his talk in the same unctious cooing manner—very inviting and sweet.

'H'm, I see you play the flute rather finely—I must say good in your case. I say such things, very rarely, mind you, and I also tell you that I know a thing, when I see it—you see—I think you will understand what I mean. In short I mean that I can make something big out of you—you understand, eh ?'

Another minute of absolute silence.

'Now, what I mean and propose is that, if you agree, as I am sure you will, I mean to take you away from this place—'

'Oh !' An exclamation of pain broke from the girl's lips, and her fingers clutched her friend's hand nervously, while the shepherd boy stood staring at the stranger with a gaping mouth. The stranger's eyes noticed the girl's movement; his voice became more and more cooing and tantalising.

'I mean to take you from this dull and deary place where you have got nothing but cows and grass (he sniffed) —water, and a few huts and—and that is all what you have got here—away to a place—'

Kamakshi's grip tghtened on the boy's hand. The stranger continued:—

'Away to a place where you have got fine streets, grand buildings, rich nice meals--'

Gopal's eyes widened and his mouth watered. The stranger saw the impression he had created, and was not slow in pursuing his advantage.

'Fame—rich people—who would give you money—lots and lots of it—rupees —sovereigns—have you ever seen a sovereign—all gold, bright yellow gold.'

The shepherd's eyes gleamed, the stranger purred on :—

'And jewels—and several other things and all for what ? For your music, simply for your music, for a mere blowing on your flute. I can make you rich, happy, famous, ah, what do you say ?' He pulled out from his pocket a gold snuffbox, and opened it leisurely, watching with covetous eyes the boy.

The two young people did not speak. She looked at him, and the stranger's watchful eyes saw that the boy was wavering beneath her steadfast gaze. The stranger spoke at once. His voice was quick, sudden and sharp.

'Oh, don't you want to be rich and to live prosperously ? Do you want to rot here, with your ragi—h'm, I see you don't like to have good food, fine dress —and fame—'

The boy's mind was made up then and there. He was innocent, and did not know the world.

'Let me go,' he cried.

The girl was frantic. 'But, Gopal, you shouldn't go,' she cried.

'We are happy enough here—very happy—you mustn't. 'She clung to his hand desperately. The boy, maddened by ambition and the glorious visions brought before him by the stranger became wild and furious. 'You ass, let me go—it is none of your business to check me—that is *my* look-out.' Say won't you leave me ? Oho !'

There was a sharp rap, as he struck at her knuckles with his flute. The poor girl drew back her hand with a cry of pain, and yet tried to stop him. He shook her off and pushed her against a tree. She staggered; her head came into sharp contact with the hard trunk of the tree. The stranger smiled appreciatively, and Gopal with a mocking grimace at the poor girl, as she lay there with the blood trickling from her head, followed the stranger out of the forest. Having gone a few yards, the boy turned back and still saw her sorrowfull gaze following him. A few minutes more and they were lost from her view. There was a lull even in the blowing of the wind as if it pitied the poor girl, as she lay there, her whole frame shaking with sobs.

III

About six years had passed after the events described above. The shepherd boy who had run away was abused for some time and then forgotten, and a new one was employed in his place. Kamakshi had now grown up into a young woman of nineteen, tall and beautiful. Although others forgot the boy, she couldn't. There was something wistful and sad about her appearance, speech, and movements. As the days passed, and the months and the years rolled on, she became thinner and thinner and pined away. Love—the wonderful and terrible flame—was scorching her away.

The days became dull and dreary for her. Often, after her daily toils were over, when the house-verandah shone white under the moon, she would sit there, shedding silent tears of pain and grief, and wondering what *he* was doing . . .

The people in the house noticed her languishing, and wondered what was the matter with her. She soon came to be called the "Sad Lily." And thus the days passed and than came the news that the Chetti's daughter was to be married.

The Chetti was rich; he had an only daughter and loved her dearly. So he was determined that the marriage should be celebrated in a fitting manner. And because of that, the arrangments that were made were very sumptuous and more than princely. A magnificent pandal was erected, special cooks were employed, and famous people in the world of entertainment were sent for, for the benefit of the numerous guests (many of them well-known in the world of trade, finance, literature, and politics) that had arrived. And even a week before the day of marriage, the Chetti's house became loud and a place of merry-making and festivity.

Everybody laughed and was gay, but *she* wasn't. She sat in an obscure corner, with a sort of wonder in her eyes, as if wondering what was all this noise about. Even on the marriage day, she didn't join in the festivity. She sat in her corner, forgetting even to take her food, thinking and thinking. She was feeling extremely weak that day. A feeling of utter exhaustion was setting over her, as she sat leaning against the wall, feeble and sick, not noticing the flight of time, how the sunny morning had now passed and the fine evening was approaching.

As she sat thus, with half-closed eyes, looking vacantly at the yellow rays of the dying sun, from somewhere a note of soft music floated through the air and reached her ears . . .

Music! soft soothing music! Slowly and painfully she raised herself and moved, weary and worn out, towards the direction the note of music came from, and as it sounded nearer and nearer, she distinguished it to be that of a flute.

Flute!—and—and that—*note*! Her heart stood still. A sharp pain shot through her temples. She put a hand to her forehead, and groped with the other for support.

That note! That note! That fine note!

'My God!' she breathed.

Bang! Bang!! Bang!!! She felt as if some one were striking at her head with a hammer from behind. She became giddy and groped and leaned on the wall for support. With a heart that was thumping fast, she staggered, step by step, towards the door of the hall in which the performance was going on. Already there was a large crowd at the door. Each of them was trying to catch a glimpse of the wonderful flute-player, who was playing to the vast audience inside the hall. She leaned against the wall—she couldn't stand—and listened to the music.

The same familiar note! the same sweet familiar melody! Her feet seemed to give way beneath her. She clasped her hands together, and the tears began to rise in her eyes.

Ah, that wonderful flourish! Ah there, that soft breath of music, sounding like a sweet encouraging whisper! Was it possible? Now that majestic sweep—sounding like the swaying of the branches of *that* banyan tree – and then that low fall, in the note, whispering like the gentle ripple that rose often in the pool under the banyan tree, that same gradual rise, that used to send a thrill through her whole frame! Those familiar quiverings, like the twitterings of birds! A sob rose in her throat and a gasp escaped from her. Her eyes closed in an ectasy of conflicting emotions. She clasped her hands to her heart, as if to stifle the cry that rose in her throat.

She started violently as a tremendous clap of hands broke out from the thrilled audience inside the hall. There came then a roar of cheering, and a buzz of great admiration followed the roar. And then the people inside the hall came out, talking and gesticulating loudly.

Next came the disciples, with their flutes tucked under their arms and then—the 'Master' himself — the wonderful performer.

She looked at him! Ha! She felt as if something was breaking with a snap inside her. It was himself! himself! Oh God! her own Gopal—her boy friend of six years ago! How could she fail to recognise him—whom she had served and looked after, and listened with such tender care and love! It was himself!

He turned his eyes on the vast crowd of admirers around him, proud to touch his garment, and as his eyes travelled over, his face beaming with smiles, they fell on a pretty girl of about eighteen, who was gazing as if she would devour him, with her hands clasped to her heart. Their eyes met—she saw that he was looking at her—and then gazing at her—and she saw his face turn grey and then white as chalk—and he staggered. Her joy was supreme—he had recognised her. The shock of her joy and the tortures she had undergone for the past one hour proved too strong for her delicate body.

She tried to speak, but she couldn't. Her tongue was tied. She smiled happily—staggered — and the next moment, the great 'Master' had caught her in his own strong arms; she knew nothing more afterwards—the room began to spin round and round, the people's faces became blurred . . . . she had fainted away.

There was great commotion and excitement in the hall. The spectators and the disciples gasped in astonishment. The great 'Master' was supporting in his arms an ordinary dirtily clad servant girl! And what more, he was weeping over her! What was the matter? They were still more surprised to see the great man lifting her in his arms and carry her towards his own abode. The people began to buzz and whisper.

As the 'Master' turned round a corner, a stout man, fashionably dressed and pompous-looking, moved forward and confronted him.

'Hullo Gopal, what is the idea?' His eyes fell on the burden in the flute-player's arms, and he raised his eyebrows when he recognised her to be the

girl he had seen with the shepherd boy when he first met them both, about six years ago.

'I am cancelling all my engagements, Sundaram.'

'What?' A frown gathered on the stout man's brow. 'You shan't—what do you mean? Do you mean to say that you are not going to play the flute.'

'Yes, yes!'

'You can't do that! How can you?' He became furious and laid a menacing hand on the unconscious form of the girl. The 'Master's' face became white with passion. The next instant, the bully was measuring his length on the ground, before the amazed look of the people in the hall. They looked up, but he had gone.

*

Kamakshi grew worse day by day. The most famous doctors in the neighbourhood of D—were sent for, but they were not able to cure her. After examining her, and after a careful consultation they pronounced that she was suffering from an ailment in her body for five years, and there was no cure for it, and that it was slowly eating her away, and that if not at once, she would succumb to it sooner or later.

But she was happy. Gopal sat near her always, administering her medicine himself, and looking to her wants himself. He sat there biting his lips, and trying to look cheerful. He found himself cursing himself and saying to himself in agony. 'Oh God, is this right on your part to punish me as much as this for my folly! Can't we both snatch a few days of happiness!' Sometimes, in the acuteness of his grief, he began to doubt even the existence of God.

Kamakshi noticed the gloom that was spreading over him and laughed and tried to talk gaily for his sake. But there was the grim truth—which must come out sooner or later. She knew that she was going to die, but that didn't disconcert her a bit. She was much more anxious about him than about herself. She asked him, begged him to take some rest for her sake, and tried her best to cheer him up with hope which, she herself knew, would never be realised. The sufferings of these two people, each trying to hide from the other for the other's sake the terrible truth, which each knew at the same time, was known to the other, can be more imagined than described.

And thus the days passed on. When she became too weak to move, he took her in his arms and carried her about. And then, one day, as she lay in the airy verandah of his house she spoke to him, taking his hand in her own:—

'Gopal!'

'Yes, my dear.'

'Let us go back to that beautiful place in the forest—that banyan tree and that pool—where we had been so happy.'

She smiled, and he also smiled—such a sad smilel—as they thought of those happy days.

He gently lifted her frail body in his arms, and carried her to the banyan tree. He spread a fine cushion under the tree and put her on it. She smiled happily, and held out her hands to him. He sat down beside her and gently leaned her on his shoulder.

The sun was just setting. The west was rosy, and long gold bars of rays stretched far across the sky; the sun was shining like a huge plate of burnished gold. The birds were retiring to their roost, and the wind was gently blowing the forest leaves. Now and then a beautiful ripple rose in the pool . . . They both watched this wonderful scene, lost in its beauty.

'Gopal!' There was a slight quiver in her voice.

'My dear!'

'Do you remember, Gopal?'

Her lips were smiling and her eyes were swimming in tears.

He bent his face, and the hot tears fell on her neck. She stroked his hair.

'Those were happy days!' she murmured dreamily. There was a tone of longing in her voice. 'Your playing the flute, and—I listening to you! Those were happy days!'

He listened and as he listened, suddenly inspiration came upon him. His hands slowly took his flute and carried it to his lips; and the next moment, the place was filled with rich music.

Music of an almost unearthly kind, sweet and melodious. He felt himself thrilled by it. Even the cows which were grazing lifted up their heads, and seemed to listen to the music which seemed to flow through their nerves. There was a lull even in the blowing of the wind, and a wonderful silence enveloped the whole place as if to leave full room for his music. The tears were rolling profusely on the sick girl's cheeks as she listened to him.

He poured his burning soul into the music, and what resulted was the expression of both their internal feelings—compelling, pathetic, and heart-tugging. Visions passed before them—visions of the days when he was a mere shepherd boy, unwordly and innocent, and she a mere servant-girl. . . He found himself playing on the flute for her, and she listening to him, gazing up at him with great love, her hands clasping his feet. . .

It was wonderful, the music that came from his flute, and he felt himself influenced by a strange feeling. The inspiration that came upon him died as suddenly as it came. The music slowed and died away. Both of them started, and found themselves back again, under the banyan tree near the pool.

Her eyes looked up at him with that same adoring gaze of the olden times. She was to him again the young girl of thirteen, small and pretty, and he too the little shepherd boy, tending the sheep, and playing to her. In that fleeting second, they caught back the old feeling of innocence and happy contentment, and found themselves young once more.

'You are wonderful,' she whispered (the same old words!), her hand round his neck. He bent towards her.

'Kama,' his voice was broken, as he whispered the words, 'I — I — love you!'

She smiled happily.

'I — am — so — happy!' Her voice was a whisper, as she looked up at him. The next moment, their lips met in one passionate kiss. And even as he was kissing her, he felt her lips growing cold, and her body relax in his arms. There was a slight rustle in the leaves, and a beautiful dove rose up and flew away . . .

His flute dropped from his hand, and rolled down into the pool. There was a little splash, them a tiny swirl and that was all . . .

There was absolute silence in the room; you could have heard a pin drop. I sat nailed to my chair, as if under a hypnotic effect, as I listened to this pathetic story. Already the stars had come out in the sky, and the moon was just rising. The room was absolutely dark save for a single shaft of moonlight falling through the window. I had forgotten even to light the lamp. I saw nothing of the Enigma, except a red glowing spot in his corner, the lighted end of his cigarette. I waited and waited, but still there was silence, oppressing and awful. I gathered some courage.

'And—then—what what became of him—the shepherd boy!' I ventured to ask in a timid whisper.

The cigarette, with a sudden jerk fell through the window, and the Enigma sprang up as if in a fury. His voice was harsh and terrible, slightly quivering with emotion.

'I was Gopal—the shepherd boy!'

He banged the window shutters and walked out of the room, while I lay sprawling in the chair, gasping under the effect of this terrible blow. It was too much for me.

THE MASK

By MANNAR KADAMBY

THE book slipped from her hands and she gave herself up to a spell of indolence. Presently, there came a loud knock at her door.

'Who is it?' she asked in a disturbed tone.

The knob turned in answer, and the door opened to discover the tall figure a smartly dressed man.

'You!' she said in slight surprise, 'why, I thought you took father and mother to the Globe.'

'So I did,' he answered calmly as he entered the room, 'but I left them at the theatre and came to . . .'

'Came to keep me company,' she finished, 'so like you. But I have not changed my mind and I am so tired. Thank you all the same,' she added curtly. 'I shall go to bed immediately. Hope you will leave me now. Good-night.'

'Not before I have a talk with you, Kamala,' he said. 'I have something of utmost importance to tell you and can't miss this chance. I have waited for days to get this.'

A brief silence followed.

'Well?' she asked.

'Before I come to the point,' he said, 'let me close the door. Now, hasn't your mother told you anything lately? If she has, it saves me trouble.'

She feigned ignorance. 'We have been talking a good lot,' she said sharply, 'about my college; she is not very much against it now. You can hardly expect a mother and daughter to keep silent.'

'It is not that, Kamala. Well, I am asking you personally . . . do you still refuse to marry me?' he asked abruptly.

She kept silent but cast a look at him which questioned his right to speak to her thus or to enter her room.

'Look here, Kamala!' he continued unmindful of her coldness. 'I pocketed my pride and broke all our conventions when I volunteered my proposal to your mother. She told me that you refused. It has pained her and she holds that your marriage ought not to have been delayed so long. Just think of our positions. How reversed they are! You should have been offered to me by your people and the choice of accepting or refusing would have been mine. But even when I proposed you have refused. Is there anything between us?'

'Yes,' she answered. 'You may think me immodest but I perfer to tell you my mind. I cannot marry you because I have known you so long and so well. The thrill and the romance of getting to know each other are all lost in this humdrum arrangement. And I don't even love you, how can I . . .?'

'But you will love me all right, Kamala.'

'Oh, the same old tale! I wonder how it has not tired you out, Prasad.'

'It is not an old tale, he rejoined vehemently; 'the whole trouble is that you have been reading too much of that sort,'—here he pointed to the neglected novel—'and it has filled you with all sorts of silly notions. No, don't stop me. I am sorry if it offends you but I can't help giving out the truth. I have come to you not to get a refusal . . . I won't take it.' His tone was almost commanding. 'I loved you and courted you in the most ardent and tender way possible. You seem to appreciate force much better. That is the only way open to me and you are compelling me to it. Take care not to refuse me. Now, be a good girl and save yourself the trouble. What do you say? Promise and you shall be happy.'

She broke into a silvery peal of laughter. 'That's a fine way of winning

a lady,' she said provokingly, 'and from when have you been learning this art? Take a bit of advice from me, sir, you have absolutely no chance and if you wish to get married at all, please don't adopt this method with any girl; we are past the stone age period!'

'But think of the consequences, Kamala, think,' he warned. 'I am not a man to boast. I can't let go the pride of possessing you. It is settled that I should have you and I would stoop to any method, but only don't force me to it. It is not a vain threat, I mean every word of it. I only hope you needn't have to learn it. Don't try to rouse any of the servants, I would stifle your cry before it can reach them. Now, perhaps you understand, you see . . .'

'I see! I see that you are a coward and a big brute!' Her delicate frame shook with anger. 'I never for once thought of you anything higher. You try to intimidate me. You . . . you big . . . you unmanly brute!' The red lips pouted in derision. 'You have the arrogance to threaten me. You actually think that I would marry you . . . and after this! I am not afraid, I would not cry for help.'

'So much the better,' he added with a perfect control in his voice. 'Since you choose misery to happiness I might as well tell you the punishment that is in store for you—yes, punishment for the slights and contempt you have flung at me. Do you think that I can bear the insult and humiliation of being refused by a mere girl. I have already thought of the method of inflicting sufferings on you. While it is easy to effect them, when once you are in the grip of that public shame, there is no escape, you are lost for ever. Neither your beauty and charms nor your education can ever deliver you from the clutches of the social stigma which would haunt you. Because, it is this beauty of yours, this charm and this accomplishment that paves the way for my scheme. It lays you bare to the merciless attack of a scandal which might even devour you. You see how each of them helps me. You are past eighteen and unmarried! Could you show me one other unmarried at that age? You are modern, my dear Kamala, too modern to be safe in your dress and behaviour and everything. It might be fashionable and certainly pleases me. But it is outrageous and criminal in the eyes of our women. Their feminine virtues are grossly offended and would soon protest, a protest which takes such a form of expression as to ostracise you. Perhaps you don't care; their company is not pleasant to you. But think of the scorns that will be levelled against you everywhere. Riches and power are a barricade against this gossip and you lose it when you reject my protection. If I but throw a suggestion to these idlers—'

'Why do you waste your breath, Prasad? I am not afraid of your threats. Need I repeat that you are not wanted here, sir?' In spite of her nonchalance, there was a slight tremor in her voice.

'If I but throw a suggestion to these idlers,' he repeated as a schoolboy does his lessons, 'that you are turning *bad*, they would grab it like starved beasts and weave the worst yarn against your moral conduct. I am sorry that I have to take the services of these fossils of women. When once the mischief gains afoot there is no undoing. The result is inevitable. You are a moral outcaste.'

'I don't care,' she declared. 'And further, they dare not scandalise me. I have done nothing to justify it. For all your professed power over them, I think you will fail, Prasad.'

'You are mistaken, do not know the world. A scandal is not based on what you do but on what you appear to do. Their interpretation of your life is anything but pleasant. They are admirably suited to write your name across an unclean sheet, they are very clever and convincing in their slanderous tongue. So that, each one adds her own tale to the general talk till the whole city will be seething with the news and what is worse, nobody would pause to think or question the truth but everyone would passively and strongly accept it.'

He stopped as if to gain breath but studied the effect of his words. Her

quickened breath told him that he was gaining ground. He went on: 'Fancy your position; picture to yourself the endless days of misery. You cannot enjoy your life, it would be a burden to you. You would begin to curse the very things that you are proud of now—beauty and learning. In the loneliness of your room, ugly thoughts would harass you and you would feel helpless against them. You will be yearning to go out in the cool shades of the evening but dare not because of the dark whispers, miserable slights both open and masked, mean jests and mockeries that await you. Men would look at you in a different light and pass you with a different smile. No! No! It is horrid and repulsive and unthinkable.'

'But it is worse to marry you,' she retorted with vehemence. 'Even now I am ashamed to own that you belong to my family.'

'Yes, it is a pity that my cousin has to suffer that torture. Remember that you can never hope to bring the law against these gossips. The biting sarcasms are so sly that while they wrong you in the worst way possible, they are free from any guilt in a court of law—they are perfectly innocent.'

'I never said that—that I would go to law,' the words faltered in her trembling lips. 'I would ignore it.'

'You cannot ignore it. You cannot brave it all. I am not painting it as black as it really is. You cannot possibly estimate the ravaging effects of this social persecution. A spirit of greater strength than yours has broken down under it; a braver heart has sought relief in suicide; stronger chords of sympathy and relationship and love have snapped under its cutting edge. You will be left alone—alone to fight the finger of scorn that would be ever pointing you!'

A tense silence fell in the room. Neither of them moved. Everything seemed dead still for a full minute. Her breath was audible, her bosom heaved visibly. Somewhere out in the night a dog growled, which though softened by the distance, broke the silence with disagreeable loudness. It roused her, as it were, and relieved her of a nervous strain. Tears welled up in her eyes. She wrung her hands and cried in despair, 'Oh, God! why don't you remove him from my way? Why? Why not take him away?' And throwing herself on the bed she began to sob out her grief.

'Kamala! Kamala!' he called out and his tone was full of self-reproach, 'I didn't expect you to take it so strong, honestly, I didn't.' He placed his hand gently on her arm and said softly, 'Forgive me.'

Her first and intense feelings were a strong loathing for the man. In that state of mind she never heard him but felt his touch. She immediately recoiled from it as if it burnt her. Controlling her sobs with an effort and pointing the door with an outstretched hand, she almost screamed, 'Leave me, go, go. . . go!'

There was something in her wet eyes, her tear-stained face, her quivering voice which was neither a command nor a request, but it compelled his implicit obedience. All the words of comfort that he wanted to say died away and remained unspoken. He went out murmuring under his breath, 'I have been a beast.'

It was too much for her to have arrested her choking grief even for that short time. His last steps died away and she relapsed into a fresh fit of sobs. Soon she was exhausted and a merciful sleep overcame her.

II

Hours glided. In the greyness of the dawn a gust of cold wind blew. It awakened her. The chill made her instinctively feel for the blanket and unable to reach it, she opened her eyes. The light was still burning. She found the blanket at her feet, neatly folded and perhaps as exactly as it was placed when the bed was made. Somehow, it struck a note of difference. Had she slept without even a covering? Warming herself under the rich woollen she

tried to sleep but even the last winks of sleep left her. Why was the light still burning? Had she forgotten to switch it off? A feeling of vague depression stole over her. She could not easily dismiss it. At last a misty recollection came to her mind. It slowly cleared and she remembered everything of the last evening. The very words rang clear in her ears. The loathing for the man diminished and her grief subsided to give place to frightful fancies of the miserable future. Her rich imagination became richer and a little morbid by fear. She built for herself the hideous picture of the sufferings of a moral outcaste—much more magnified than he had depicted or its actual possibility. The horror rose before her in all its ugliness. It was complete in every detail. She saw it at home, in the college, and out in the evening walk. All her friends would turn their faces away from her and perhaps disclaim her friendship. Virtuous mothers would forbid their daughters to mix with her. And what about her father—her dear old father who had always loved and esteemed her? What would he think! She shrank from the answer; she had no courage to face it. Yet the answer came, piercing through all her efforts at keeping it back. It stung her sensitive heart to agonising pain. In her anguish she addressed the empty room and gasped, 'Father, Father! I shall marry him. He shall have me even though I don't love him. I shall marry him.' Thinking that she had cried very loud, she lay still as if waiting for some hurrying footsteps towards her room. But none came. It was scarcely more audible than a whisper.

In the morning, Krishna Prasad started for his country mansion. It was drizzling and the heavy clouds foretold a driving rain. Yet he decided to do the whole distance of six and forty miles in his car. His decision was so sudden that it surprised everyone in the house except Kamala and her mother. He had come to stay with them at least a month and hardly a week had passed. And his mother was expected in a few days.

Lakshmi, Kamala's mother, knew that it had to do something with her daughter. 'I wouldn't let you go,' she told Prasad, 'if I can help it.'

Prasad looked away from her and stood for a while gazing the misty street through the doorway. 'I must go,' he said smply.

'I know. At least let me have a minute's talk before you go. Come to my room.' When they were alone, she asked, 'So, she refused?'

'Don't make me say anything harsh, Lakshmi. I think you have not understood your daughter. She has a mind of her own. I threatened her as you had suggested—even worse, possibly to ugliness. Perhaps, you are not to be blamed. I thought I deserved any girl I wanted. She has altered my . . . unfortunately', he wound up in despair, 'I have ruined every chance permanently.'

Lakshmi was troubled at his tone of despair. She was very anxious to marry her daughter to him. Not because he was her brother's son or he had rich estates fetching tens of thousands a year. Of course, these mattered; these reasons she gave to others. But the real reason was that she was conscious that all the other families in her community were orthodox and some who were less orthodox were poor. All of them would hesitate to marry such a grown up and extremely modern girl. Therefore each delay worried her.

'She is a spoilt child, 'she said, 'quite spoilt by her father's immoderate petting. We would not have had this trouble if he were not talking all that nonsense to her, of marrying one of her own choice and all that. I wish men remained away from the matrimonial question. They know so little. You deserve a better girl, my dear boy,' she continued trying to please him; 'I should say she is a fool to refuse you; any other would only go begging for such a chance.'

'Please don't flatter me. I think mother and you have spoilt me by it. Poor mother! She does not know

Kamala. I better prevent her coming here.'

'Oh, no. Don't. I have another method which is sure to succeed. You shall hear of it shortly.'

'No more force, Lakshmi. I am sick of it. 'And I wonder whether I will be happy after all this.'

'I understand. But it is her father who has made her that; she is by herself a sensible girl. I do know her. Don't worry. She is sure to be happy when once she is married to you. Only remember that you will succeed.'

Before he started, he once thought of bidding good-bye to Kamala; but did not, because he knew it would not be tolerated.

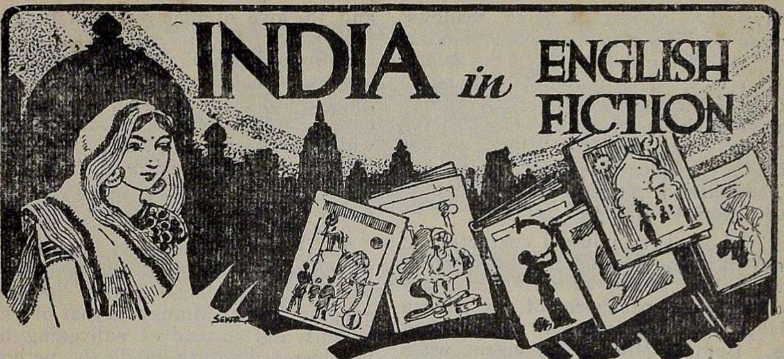
Kamala Devi was calm now. Her mental conflict had ended. She had to play a certain part in this world and she determined to play it well. This sudden departure of Prasad meant only one thing to her, it was the first step in his scheme of revenge. Silence on her part would be dangerous. She began a letter to him but soon found ill at it. So the letter was torn to pieces and she decided to confide to her mother, as it were, her love affair. 'Oh, yes,' she said to herself sadly, 'mother would be only too glad to arrange the rest. He would learn it immediately and the mischief stopped.'

Three weeks later the papers announced a quiet society wedding of the rich zamindar Krishna Prasad and Kamala Devi. This quietness was a disappointment to many of his relatives and friends who had looked forward to it as a period of great feasting and pageantry. The bride had made her one request clear; she did not want any loud celebrations. Her advanced views were praised by her father. And Krishna Prasad, whose joy at her sudden consent only equalled his surprise, was too eager to please her. So, the wedding was unusually quiet for the Prasad family.

III

To the outside world the married life of Krishna Prasad presented the happiest aspect. It was a love union and nothing else than harmony would result from it. He was a loving husband—well, as if anyone could be different with such a wife! For once, the people thought, nature had cast away her freak and grouped two yearning souls together.

The same pride and sensitiveness that made Kamala yield to his threat kept her from giving room to any unpleasant impressions. He too was proud and did his best to show a bright appearance. In company he was very endearing and had learnt that it would be solicitous only when others were near. There was sometimes even a demure response that half pleased and half surprised him. It was then, for a fleeting moment, a faint hope brightened him that after all his wife possessed a warm heart which might show itself at some later date. But the next minute he remembered how she refused him any chance of explaining to her; how she deprecated everyone of his endeavours to show his love. True, she was obedient to him in every way but it was a passive submission with an air of cold resignation that discouraged him. All these told him that she recognised in him not the love of a husband but the right of authority over her that had been obtained by the marriage bond. The house was always bright and the garden perfect with its blossoms and green leaves and grass. The oblique sunshine fell every morning on fresh flowers in the drawing room and played a warm melody in contrast to the cold discord that sounded in their life. Her father was glad to have successfully shown the society that education did not spoil his daughter but it befitted her more to the duties of a wife. The deceit was complete; wealth and social position helped to draw the veil closer. The people little knew that the fond endearments and the joyous smiles which always lit their faces were merely a thick mask, deliberately worn by them to hide the want of understanding and sympathy that chilled their hearts within.



'Never mind the cost, you must comfort yourself like a white man and a gentleman. You are not here for your health—or for recreation, but in the sacred cause of commerce.'

A note from "DISTANT DRUMS."

IT is a fashion fast growing nowadays for a Westerner who visits India or who has been in India for some time to write a travel-book recording his impressions of the country and its peoples, or if he is more ambitious and imaginative, to write a novel and swell the bulk of what is called the "Anglo-Indian" fiction. These novelists are of two kinds: editors of Anglo-Indian periodicals and the Civil Service men. Mr R. J. Minney, author of *Distant Drums*,* was some time ago the editor of the *Englishman* published from Calcutta; in the present novel 'he tells the story of an Englishman's commercial life spent in Calcutta and extending over about forty years.' Nicholas Perrybooth, the hero, begins life in London as a clerk, but being thrown aside by his sweetheart Judy Whipple, at her mother's bidding, leaves his job and comes to Calcutta as assistant to a firm. He is dissatisfied with the dull round of dissipation which the English businessman in India indulges in, quarrels with his boss, and is shipped back to England. He returns to Calcutta as a pedlar of cheap goods, and after many reverses, succeeds in establishing a prosperous business. Judy, meanwhile, has married and a son is born to her but the husband turns out a wastrel and sets up her boy against her. Disgusted, she runs away and wanders in the continent for some time as companion to an old lady, and on her death jonis the Salvation Army and comes to India. Perrybooth, failing to know her whereabouts, lavishes all his affection on John, gives him a good education, and makes him a clever businessman. The post-War slump has a disastrous effect on Perrybooth's prosperity; his wealth vanishes. John, in despair, shoots himself; and just when Nick is recovering from the blow, old, poor, and impoverished, he meets Judy who has grown grey in the Indian Salvation Army.

Distant Drums is weak in plot and artificial in manner. The desire to avoid the commonplace makes it unreal; it looks like a pageant, distant and dim, passing over an autumnal stream. The characters arestiff and self-concious, and many of them, though vividly drawn, have nothing to do with the story. The Tonellos, Joe, the ticket collector, Mrs Gomez, Lavender, Ernie, and Tent

* Chapman and Hall, 7*s*. 6*d*.

have the interest of being shadows; more ambitious in the delineation but not real in the conception is the Swami 'who is neither stupid nor inappreciative of Nicholas, who holds all human ameliorative effort to be but a bribing of the gods.' Says he: 'Please do not help my people, O best of Sahibs . . . They must help themselves. Thus only can they attain release.'

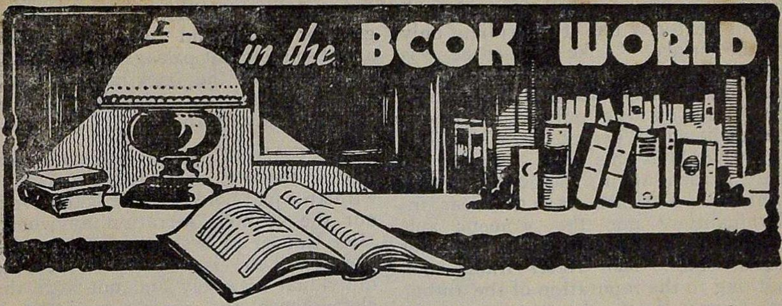
Nicholas is an unusual character but not an impossible one; his pursuist after wealth and power with his eyes always on the independence of the Indian labourer is exciting as all such pursuit is. But Mr Minney is pungent when describing the life of an English businessman in Calcutta. 'A life so artificial to the tropics that soon they themselves became artificial. All pose, no reality. No emotions. Tempers, yes—that was expected of you; it was a cult. To be without temper was to be without prestige. Patriotism too, and the love of money.' And hear to the gospel of Mr Byle of Byle & Co. (those who know Urdu will smile at the aptness of the name, the *Times Literary Supplement* remarks): 'Never mind the cost, you must comport yourself like a white man and a gentleman. You are not here for your health– or for recreation, but in the sacred cause of commerce.'

There are some good descriptive passages in the book, most in picturesque journalese; the method adopted by Mr Minney is that of the cinema and instead of enlivening he bewilders. Few can handle the method with success, and that with brilliant success; others aspiring to do this produce sound and fury, signifying nothing. *Distant Drums* is full of sound, and nowhere is heard in it the clear cool voice that wants to convey.

An Indo-Anglian

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Matthew Arnold



ENGLISH

Susan and Joanna, by Miss Elizabeth Cambridge (Cape, *7s. 6d.*)

Men Never Know, by Fran Vicki Baum (Bles, *7s. 6d.*)

Delay in the Sun, by Anthony Thorne (Heinemann, *7s. 6d.*)

We Have Come to A Country, by Miss Lettice Cooper (Gollancz, *7s. 6d.*)

IN any of her novels, *Hostages of Fortune*, or *Three Daughters*, or *The Sycamore Tree* Miss Cambridge's eye is for the beauty of common things, and her mind for their delicate poetic texture.

Susan and Joanna tells the friendship of two women, who as wives and according to the method each has chosen, laugh over their mistakes and those of their respective husbands. Miss Cambridge does not concern herself with religion or marriage; she presents two distinct and delightful matrimonial sketches with intimacy and unfailing of what is called the "plausible harmony." Susan is too sweet to be true; the milk in her nature is such that it would not turn even at the slightest touch of the lime; her meekness would submit to any inflictions of her husband. Joanna, on the other hand, is "clever"; 'there was no examination so hard but she would set her teeth and pass it, at the head of the list . . . . The fact that she found books very difficult to master only confirmed her in her opinion that she must have intelligence of a very high order. Otherwise she wouldn't be able to master them. Every set book had been a strange wild animal for her to break in and tame. Once broken in it became as much her own as if it had been a favourite child. She would have been furious if anyone had ever questioned the value of her knowledge. No one did, for nobody else in Bract had a trained mind. Like Susan, whose vagueness Joanna found so deplorable, they thought and worked untidily.' The characters of Bladon, Garry, and Mrs Cato are drawn with much charm and sympathy, and Miss Cambridge's pen seems to be dipped in sunshine when she contrasts the characters and shifts the scenes and moods.

The scene of *Men Never Know* is laid in Berlin and Paris and its action occupies five days. Its chief characters are Kurt Dorsete, an ambitious young German judge, his wife Evelyn, and Frank Davis, a rich young American who is spending a few days in Berlin on a business trip. A romantic by temperament and unsuited to the practical tasks of managing a house on the scanty income of her husband, Evelyn is sorely conscious of the numbness of her deeper nature—her husband is incapable of stirring it as he is engrossed in his work—and when at a tennis club in Grunewald she meets Frank Davis and is introduced to him, she realises that the *thing* has happened. Frau Vicki

Baum works out the detail of the passionate attachment with ease and wonderful dexterity but it is brilliant only on the surface. 'Like all men he was vain in an intense and childish way, and like all men his vanity was concentrated on the only outbreak of colour he could permit himself.' That is Frank Davis; his love seems to be only a casual affair; the book raises no problem. The men have no clear individualities; nor the women; and besides the narrative interest the novel has no other. *Men Never Know* adds nothing to the reputation of the author of *Grand Hotel*; if we may say so, it harms that reputation a little.

Delay in the Sun is quite an artificial thing; however, it has moments of enchantment and attractively-turned phrases which show the author as a successful minor poet. Julian has the gift for boring and Agnes too; there are absolutely flat passages of soap and sentiment but the book has a certain innate strength to claim for itself a shadow of a pattern.

Miss Lettice Cooper is bold to have a modern theme but she does not treat it with an equal boldness. It is too even, not the slightest serration anywhere. Miss Cooper is best as delineator of a character; she is concerned with the individual intensely and not with the class—hence the success—and she is very shrewd in her delineation. *We Have Come to A Country* is an honest book though not a brilliant one.

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